

INFORMAL SEGREGATION ILLUMINATED

Durrheim, Kevin & Dixon, John (2005) **Racial encounter: The social psychology of contact and desegregation**. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0415305327. Pages 256.

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This is a marvellous book. It is sharp, clear, bright-minded and deals with a very important issue for group relations in general: the psychology of segregation and desegregation. It is a major contribution to our new era (post 1990) understanding of contact and group relations in deeply divided societies. While the focus of empirical research is on South Africa the issues under consideration are more widespread, and a good deal of the literature surveyed deals with contact and racial relations in the United States. The book sets out a series of studies on contact and segregation, on vacation time beaches of south coast KwaZulu-Natal. Why is this book so good? I will give a number of reasons.

First it demonstrates a very good theoretical grasp. The authors have read widely drawing on a range of different literatures. It is innovative; it offers a set of new ideas and adds to theory, pulling together ideas from discursive and spatial perspectives. Useful new ideas centre round concepts of “working models” of contact and “lay ontologising”. As a theoretical lens it gives attention to the notion of “meaning”, deeply informed by discursive approaches but in a more sophisticated fashion. In much of the discourse varieties people’s voices float about without bodies, without anchors. Here voices are put back into particular racialised bodies which in turn are located in real specified places. Alternative concepts here almost create a new school or new theoretical version: the micro-ecology of experience perspective. Still on theoretical matters, this book most astonishingly reintroduces “feelings” back into psychology. What a surprise! In everyday parlance it is just commonsense to say that people have strong feelings about place, about home-space for example. But in mainstream psychology both emotions and physical space/place have been left to the fringes. Place identity surges back to a rightful theoretical centrepiece in **Racial encounter**.

Second the Durheim & Dixon book gives us some wonderful, bold and innovative methods. It enables us to look at maps of human bodies moving in both space and time, yet it also gives us indices of overall informal segregation. It is refreshing to see a study that draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods with equal adroitness. Methods here are employed as useful tools to inform and illustrate, as methods always should be used, and not as weapons to defend purported paradigms. Methods here are

properly rigorous yet are not fetishized; they are used in service of better understanding.

Third, it is a good book because it takes a critical lens to existing work. It questions received wisdom regarding the contact hypothesis, challenges a decontextualized view of attitudes and puts a new light on the thorny issue of "lived experience". It gives attention to real people and asks them to tell the researchers what they are doing, what they are thinking. It gives us more than one side to the lived experience of inter-racial contact.

Finally it is a good book because of wonderful use of language. It is well written. It maintains interest. The sequencing is smart. At times it reads like a detective novel: what next is going to happen; can the old contact-hypothesis get up from the canvas or is the knockout blow rather final? The mode of argument allows for a shift in thinking in a number of areas simultaneously: attitudes, "race" and racism; contact; desegregation; group relations. It makes a number of significant contributions. In years to come this will still be regarded as a significant step forward. Do get the book. It is a treasure.