Contact Theory Fails—Embedded in Racial Logic

Contact hypothesis remains trapped in the offensive use of “race”—must break from raciological thought

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This article departs from most in the present volume of Journal of Social Issues (in press). I argue that the contact hypothesis is not a transformative antiracist strategy. Even its revised forms remain trapped in raciological thought—various discourses that animate the idea of race (Ware, 2002a, p. 20). This calls for a “critical literacy” (Lee & Lutz, 2005, p. 4) for the use of “race” in order to disrupt and invent alternatives to this mode of thinking. (I put the word “race” in quotation marks in this instance to remind us of its offensive and derogatory nature. Hereafter I omit the quotation marks for easier reading.)

Contact theory is merely reformist, not transformative—it’s embedded in raciological thought and supports current racialized structures

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In their combined effect these four limitations locate contact theory within raciological thought, making contact a reformist, not a transformative antiracist strategy. This is revealed, firstly, in its conception of race and racism(s) as isolated from, rather than being among an orchestra of interrelated social factors that perpetuate and extend racialized inequality. Secondly, in its emphasis on individual prejudice and stereotypes, contact theory attempts to render the outcomes of racialized power less damaging, leaving intact the structures and arrangements (racist ideology, White privilege and imbrications in class inequality) that generate these outcomes. Finally, its assumption that race is given and stable reinforces racialized identities. Transformative strategies, on the contrary, consider intersections of power with a view to disrupting arrangements and systems of knowledge that give them life. They destabilize existing group identities, opening possibilities for new solidarities and coalitions (Fraser, 1995, 2003).

Contact Theory Fails—Utopian

Contact theory is based on flawed, utopian understandings about racial relations—seven reasons

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Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005) argue for a discursive approach to contact. They name three limitations to contact theory: (1) utopianism—an emphasis on survey and experimental designs for testing the effects of contact, and on generic typologies of optimal contact which decontextualize racialized power; (2) neglect of agency; and (3) theoretical individualism—understanding social change as cognitive shifts among prejudiced individuals. They suggest three extensions to contact research: (1) recovering strategies to navigate and gather meanings given to everyday contact; (2) moving beyond the prejudice paradigm toward a conception of racism(s) as ideological; and (3) comparative methodology. I extend their critique, noting four deeper limitations: (1) a psychometric imaginary based on an inadequate conception of racism; (2) an assumption that race is given, homogeneous and stable—one that favors the ocular over the auditory, and linear over complex webs of relations; (3) contact/noncontact dualism; and (4) inattention to pathologies of White privilege. I gather thoughts toward a theoretical alternative: a critical race literacy premised on critical race theory (CRT), critical White studies (CWS), and Fanon’s “stretched Marxism” (FSM). Why these frameworks? First, in South Africa, contact theory is predominantly concerned with improving racialized intergroup relations. Scholarship on critical antiracism, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned in literature on contact theory. Second, these frameworks encompass and expand Dixon et al.’s (2005) extensions to contact research while locating them in a more radical frame.

Contact Theory Fails—False Racial Assumptions

Contact theory’s psychometric imaginary assumes racism is static and able to be manipulated—doesn’t recognize that racial practices are ingrained and hidden in society

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A Psychometric Imaginary More than simply utopian, the methodologies associated with contact theory—applied in much of the work published in the present volume of Journal of Social Issues—are imbued with a “psychometric imaginary.” I coin this term, in analogy to Du Toit’s (2007) “econometric imaginary: an approach that frames questions of social understanding as essentially questions of measurement” (p. 2). Psychometrics involves the measurement and representation, for purposes of analysis, of psychological variables such as prejudice. A psychometric imaginary is premised on an inadequate conception of racism as “predefined” (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005b, p. 447). This inadequacy is confirmed by Leach (2005), who argues that “social psychologists have tended to offer poor conceptualizations of . . . racism” (p. 441) because they tend not to use theorizations developed in related disciplines. Field studies aim toward definitive conditions for optimal contact and a final formula for the efficient management of racism. But there can be no such formula because racism is neither static nor monolithic. Gilroy (2004) notes, “there can be no single or homogeneous strategy against racism because racism itself is never homogeneous. It varies, it changes, and it is always uneven” (pp. 263 – 264). The psychometric imaginary poses questions about changing sociopolitical, cultural, and discursive phenomena—racism(s) and racialization—as questions of objective measurement. It imagines that these phenomena are static and open to manipulation (see Shelton, 2003) and management. Laboratory and survey techniques aim to measure the relationship between conditions of contact and degrees of prejudice. This assumes racism(s) are openly acknowledged and/or obvious. But, both foreign (Essed, 1991; Sivanandan, 2000) and South African research (Dolby, 2001; Durrheim & Dixon, 2005a; Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Franchi, 2003a; Luhabe, 2002; Robus & Macleod, 2006; Soudien, 2004, 2007; Steyn & Van Zyl, 2001) shows that racism(s) have become normalized, often rendering them ingrained and hidden. The emphasis on measurement reduces racism(s) to attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudice and obscures the multiple and related registers of racism(s), as well as its systemic nature and political character. Vourc’h (2006) and Maylam (2001) remind us of these registers. One is ideological—for example, the formalized racial policy of apartheid. Another register is racial consciousness—popularly held ideas about perceived differences between groups of humans, premised on phenotype and culture (Maylam, 2001). The persistent conception of postapartheid South African society as comprising “four races”—“White,” “Black,” “Coloured,” and “Indian”—is one such idea. These ideas inform everyday practice, including knowledge production, and quietly sustain racialized power. They inform strategies for negotiating lived realities of interracial contact neglected by contact theorists (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005a, call these strategies “working models of contact”). A third register refers to informal everyday practices such as assimilation, self-segregation, selective contact, avoidance of, and assumed license to direct violence toward the racialized Other, revealed in the South African studies and news reports noted above. These practices are supported by, and in turn, (re)produce racial consciousness. Usually deeply buried, they remain unchallenged and escape the measurement and management of the narrow psychometric imaginary of contact theory. Furthermore, the mutilating psychological effects on both perpetrators and survivors of racism(s) are beyond such quantification. “Thinking with Our Eyes”

Contact theory relies on false assumptions that race is homogenous and visible—this destroys the complexity in race and legitimizes apartheid

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In addition to its limited conception of racism(s), contact theory assumes that race is given and visible, and that racialized groups are bounded, homogeneous, and stable. Reicher (1986) questions these assumptions: contact theory “presupposes both the preexistence and the continued existence of race; consequently it fails to address, explicitly, questions about changes in the use of race” (pp. 162 – 163). For him this theory disqualifies itself from challenging commonsense racism as “it accepts and imposes the cornerstone of that common sense: racialization” (p. 164). There is evidence of these assumptions in contact research in South Africa. Schrieff, Tredoux, Dixon, and Finchilescu’s (2005) study of race and space reveal the use of race as a visible given. This observational study of voluntary racially segregated seating arrangements in university residence dining halls read race off students’ bodies. Following a founding raciological myth, this taken-forgranted visibility of race assumes researchers “knew” who was “White,” “Black,” “Coloured,” and “Indian” simply by looking at bodies in space. Similarly, Durrheim and Dixon (2005b) read race off beachgoers’ bodies prior to conducting interviews. The dining-hall study excluded tables seating what they read as “Indian” and “Coloured” students because these were in the minority. These studies used a Black–White binary which flattens the complexity of race, forcing it into a simplistic ingroup/outgroup conception of the world. This racialized regime of looking naturalizes race and racial membership, legitimates and enlivens apartheid categories, and obscures cultural competencies as components of making and complicating race. Research and fictional accounts reveal lay interpretations of who is “White on the inside,” due to their cultural and political practices, despite visible somatic markers (Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Matlwa, 2007; Soudien, this issue). These reveal judgments about the fit between class, the cultural effects of racially heterogeneous schooling, and racial membership. Such interpretations of contemporary intersections of race and class make wealthier Black South Africans “culturally White,” and defy notions of race as visible. They confirm that what it means to be “Black” is contested, not given. They challenge the methodological dependence of contact theorists on the existence of homogenous groups in linear relationship: the in- and outgroup. While particular patterns of intersection are specific to South Africa today, they are by no means unique to this society (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Gillborn, 2006). Tracking bodily movements in space and time lends itself to uncritical thinking and doing with one’s eyes. This reveals the need for a critical literacy for the use of race that attends to practices that might be so embedded in raciology that, despite our intentions and proclaimed antiracist politics, they remain subject to its regimes of truth.

Contact theory over-simplifies race into an in-group and an out-group—multiple strategies against racism are needed, since contact theory fails to adapt to the changes of race

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 Why Fanon’s “Stretched Marxism?” Listening is necessary if we are to identify continuities and changes in the use of race. In practice, this means examining how meanings of race articulate with class, gender and nation to produce specific forms of violence, exclusion and racialization.Working-poor Black South Africans experience violentWhite racism (Flowers, 2008; Joubert, 2008). At the same time, the recent xenophobic attacks reveal that refugees and migrants from elsewhere in Africa experience violent and gendered xenoracism on the part of predominantly working class Black South Africans (Crush, 2008). To further complicate matters, the racialization of wealthy Black South Africans as “culturally White” gives new meaning to Fanon’s (1990) argument that “you are White because you are rich” (p. 31). These complex articulations of race, class, gender, and citizenship defy the ingroup and outgroup linearity of contact theory. They imply a need for multiple and flexible strategies against racism and racialization. The definitive conditions assumed by contact theory for optimal contact, and its hope for a final formula against racism, are feeble in the face of such stubborn mutations of race.

Contact Theory Fails—Can’t Solve Rcsm

Assimilation includes discourse preferring white institutions while putting the burden of enabling interracial contact and reforming racist views on black participants—thus, no long-term effect post-contact

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Whiteness: Not Simply an Ellipsis Most researchers assume that contact undoes stereotypes by enabling deeper knowledge of the Other. Results show that dominant groups sometimes relearn, while at other times they might unlearn, racist messages about the Other, but not necessarily with any transformative political effect (Dixon et al., 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). This paradox arises from leaving whiteness unquestioned. This omission considerably undermines the efficacy of contact in the face of reconfigurations of privilege in contexts of assimilation. In his study of South African secondary schools, Soudien (2004) argues that “assimilationism is overwhelmingly hegemonic as a practice of integration” (p. 104). Studies of tertiary institutions reveal that assimilation encodes discourses of excellence with references to historically White institutions, and to learners, parents, and communities marked “White.” Discourses of deficit are encoded with references to historically Black institutions, and to learners, parents, and communities marked “Black” (Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Robus & Macleod, 2006). Research at the University of Cape Town revealed that assimilation meant an unequal division of labor in which Black students did the “race work.” They bore the burden of responsibility for enabling crossracial interaction and challenging negative constructions of blackness. They held the negative projections of failure and incompetence, the awareness of these dynamics, and the feelings related to this burden of race (anxiety, anger, irritation, powerlessness, invisibility, marginality, and fatigue). This left White students free of responsibility for any discomfort arising from contact, making antiracist work the domain of Black students (Erasmus & de Wet, 2003). Contact theory fails to attend to these capillarial workings of whiteness.

Contact is used as an excuse by White people to claim “no prejudice” while continuing to avoid true political action to combat racism

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Earlier, I argued that contact theory assumes that race and racism(s) are “simple . . . crude . . . and obvious” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 15). Gillborn (2006) argues that these are characteristic assumptions of particular discourses of whiteness. This suggests that contact theory is not simply blind to these discourses, but firmly located within their regimes of thought. Similarly, with reference to Britain, Hopkins, Reicher, and Levine (1997) show how mainstream social psychology’s theory of prejudice reflects and reproduces hegemonic, common sense understandings of racism, and bolsters arguments that deny systemic racism, thus questioning its capacity to offer critique. Some practical consequences of contact show how it can serve whiteness. Contact is used by some White people to claim “no prejudice,” thus justifying their claims of antidiscriminatory efforts, and ultimately of innocence. A common way of asserting “no prejudice” is the claim “I don’t see race,” and this is often supported by claims of contact. Goldberg (2004) helps one interrogate this claim. He reminds us that, historically, resistance to race classification is associated with the political practice of antiracism. He notes that the connection between antiracialism (being against the idea; the classification) and antiracism (political activity against the material, cultural, institutional and psychological expressions of this classification in everyday life) has weakened over time. This slippage between antiracialism and antiracism is embedded in the claim “I don’t see race.” Consequently, argues Goldberg (2004), the end of racism has become conflated with the end of using race as a marker of both privilege and disadvantage. “Not seeing race” as an end in itself, empties the political challenge to end racism of its substantive political content. He argues that it erases the language for naming the discursive effects of race, thus foreclosing any form of public or institutional intervention against racial injustice and removing the terms for claiming redress. This foreclosure makes “antiracialism . . . whiteness by other means” (p. 225). Leach notes that the discipline of social psychology “has long ignored the substantive quality of ‘racial’ categorization” (1998, p. 255), not by erasing race, but through its apolitical theorizations. Thus we see how contact can serve whiteness by indirectly affirming claims of “no prejudice” which position White people as innocent and antidiscriminatory, and by depoliticizing struggles to end racism. This nuanced way of sustaining White privilege is referred to in Green, Sonn, and Matsebula’s (2007) review of various ways in which apparently antiracist practice serves White privilege. Such claims and practices reveal pathologies of White privilege—innocence, entitlement, denial, benevolent patronage, oppressive courtesies, and arrogance—left unaddressed by contact research. These deeply embedded traces of persistent White dominance call for interrogating the life of whiteness in everyday encounters as well as knowledge production. In this vein, Reicher (2007) notes the importance of “addressing the ways the ingroup is defined” (p. 830). Similarly, Hook and Howarth (2005) note the need to question “the role of whiteness as an ordering principle of knowledge” (p. 507). Reicher (2007) reminds us of the significance of outgroup collective action in combating racism. Equally important is resistance from those assumed to be of the “ingroup.” Ware (2002b) presents a crosscultural, comparative history of resistance to White supremacy by those marked “White.” This provides resources for formulating what, in the economy of “race work,” “White work” can be in critical antiracist practice. She notes three practices. First, “the possibility that one can stop being White” (p. 159) is not about inhabiting race differently, nor is it about developing a positive White identity (Katz, 1978). It is rather “about finding the will and the courage to change oneself from a White person to a not-White person” (Ware, 2002b, p. 160). The real challenge, then, is to live and think outside a racial frame, as whiteness cannot be disengaged from its colonial and racist content. Second, she reminds us to separate what people look like from their political practice. Third, she notes that interrogating whiteness and its consequences reveals its dehumanizing effects—its foundations in the trauma of the colonized and survivors of racism. Highlighting this dehumanization might help counteract blindness to the history and consequences of privilege. The limited parameters of contact theory render these practices outside its bounds, casting doubt on its capacity to contribute to the elimination of racism and racialization.

Contact theory over-simplifies race into an in-group and an out-group—multiple strategies against racism are needed, since contact theory fails to adapt to the changes of race

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Not one single solution to racism—aff alone cannot attempt to solve

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Implications for Practice This triangular conceptual frame (CRT, CWS, and FSM) of “iterative project[s] of scholarship, social justice [and liberation]” (Tate, 1997, p. 235), suggests new practices. Contrary to Pettigrew’s (1998) call for conceptual economy in contact theory, critical race literacy demands conceptual expansion if we are to grapple with (1) the tenacity of ideas of race among both beneficiaries and survivors of its unjust effects; (2) the constantly changing complexity of racism(s); and (3) its location as just one axis in a complex web of power configurations that sustain racism(s). These persistent racial logics imply that no single antiracist praxis has the last word. Instead, such praxis demands regular reflective returns to theories and practices to unearth their limits and to stretch their innovative possibilities in the face of reinventions of race. Contrary to the “final formula” that is at the heart of contact theory, this suggests a provisional and flexible critical antiracist praxis.

Turn—Contact Leads to Racism

Increased interracial contact triggers more racial conflict

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Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis posits that, given optimal conditions, contact between antagonistic social groups will reduce prejudice and consequently improve intergroup relations. A wide range of studies conducted internationally (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and a small number in postapartheid South Africa, support this hypothesis (e.g., Holtman, Louw, Tredoux, & Carney, 2005). However, accounts of lived realities of contact in contemporary South Africa challenge this hypothesis (Dolby, 2001; Durrheim & Dixon, 2005a; Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Flowers, 2008; Joubert, 2008; Luhabe, 2002; Soudien, 2004, 2007; Steyn & Van Zyl, 2001). They reveal instead that interracial contact often triggers racial conflict. These accounts show that brutal dehumanization of the racialized Other, avoidance of the Other through self-segregation, selective contact, and coerced assimilation into hegemonic norms, are predominant manifestations of these antagonisms. This evidence challenges Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami’s (2003) assertion that the contact hypothesis is “one of psychology’s most effective strategies for improving intergroup relations” (p. 5). It reveals the deeper limitations of the theory.

Interracial contact is very selective—in combination with continued avoidance of the racialized “Other,” flawed contact theory props up the racial hierarchy

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Contact/Noncontact Dualism There is a tendency in the literature to construct a dualism between contact and noncontact social formations (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005a; Foster & Finchilescu, 1986). Foster and Finchilescu (1986), for example, describe apartheid South Africa as a noncontact society. This paints a simplified picture of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past. Pratt’s (1992) conceptualization of colonial encounters as “contact zones”—“social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (p. 4)—is a more complex view. In lived reality, apartheid was about carefully managed contact under very specifically prescribed conditions that combined selective inclusion of Black people in subordinate positions with their exclusion from White space. By day Black people with pass books were allowed into the intimate spaces of White homes to do menial work, an arrangement that helped maintain what it meant to be White. They were allowed into White neighborhoods to build and fix roads and tend gardens, tasks that enabled the superfluity of living “White.” Today, Durrheim and Dixon’s (2005a) White respondents prefer not to share a beach with Black holidaymakers, but the likelihood that they employ a Black woman as a domestic worker and child minder is extremely high. Daily, and during vacations, domestic workers tend employers’ toddlers, carry them on their backs, carry young White boys’ schoolbags as they walk them home from school, and go grocery shopping with their employer “madams.” This combination of selectively prescribed contact with avoidance of contact keeps in place a racialized class order.