

# Managing diversity in higher education: Understanding and tackling ethnic stratification in social comfort

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on a higher education comparative study of 184 African-American students in the United States (US) and 310 Black South African undergraduate students in South Africa, the authors identify patterns of social comfort in relation to ethnic difference and similarity. Respective groups were administered identical Revised Social Scales. Factor analysis suggested two major categories of social comfort for African-American students, while Black South African students yielded three major emergent groups. A high correlation between these non-intimate and intimate categories was found among the out-group attitudes of African-American students, indicative of similarity in sample group attitude. The converse was found with black students; a low variable correlation indicates high variability in question-answering and low similarity in approach to various social situations with the out-group.

**Keywords:** diversity, ethnicity, social comfort, social comparison, South Africa, United States

## **INTRODUCTION**

Schools in the United States (US) have been desegregated for over 50 years, rendering an integrated school career for African-American undergraduate students. Since achieving democracy status in 1994, South African undergraduate students

would be some of the first students able to claim to have had desegregated schooling. In order to make sense of racial experiences and social comfort levels, we need to situate ethnic segregation in its respective historical settings.

The creation of the US spans four centuries (Johnson 1997) and shares with South Africa a colonialist conquest concomitant with the abuse of indigenous people, a reputation for slavery, a history laced with abusive segregation, struggle for independence and achieving democracy. European-American prejudices towards African-Americans were mobilised into acts of segregation and discrimination that affected every aspect of life (Holmes 2004). The same orientation presided in South Africa; through National Party victory and politics, racial segregation was enforced in all thinkable components of South African life (Meredith 2005).

There is a parallel between the South African War (1899–1902) and the American Civil War (1861–1865). The period that followed military defeat in the respective countries was filled with violent rebellion and the aspiration to establish supremacy, as well as inter-group separation (Messner, Baller and Zevenbergen 2005). The US had legislated segregation through the Jim Crow laws that were active between 1876 and 1965 (Johnson 1997). Apartheid, underscored by insidious legislation, was also described as ‘separate development’ (Seekings and Natrass 2005, 18). The very tenets of apartheid were an outflow of group inferiority among Afrikaners, and a warped kind of identity crisis (Manzo and McGowan 1992, 1).

The industrialisation of South Africa changed the playing field for people to become more competitive regarding issues such as jobs, wealth and economic opportunity, which motivated the stratification of education. And so the very premise of the Bantu Education Act of 1953 was to limit and control the ambitions of young Black South Africans. Education was not compulsory for people of colour, and it was illegal to set up new schools for people of colour prior to receiving the government’s approval.

Nowadays, there is ongoing societal racism in the US, more overt in some cases than others. Overt racism was replaced by contemporary interracial discrimination, by commissioning race-neutrality and colour-blindness. European-Americans act as if race does not exist (colour-blind idealism), while it is a salient factor for African-Americans (Apfelbaum, Sommers and Norton 2008). Colour-blind attitudes are defined as the dismissal and depreciation of racism or the ‘denial of the social significance of race’ (Gushue 2004, 399). Colour-blindness or race-neutrality is used to justify the relinquishing of affirmative action or reparative efforts (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick 2004), and to avoid coming across as biased (Apfelbaum et al. 2008).

African-Americans continue to experience socio-economic disadvantage, racial discrimination and alienation from European-Americans (Holmes 2004), which leads to increased out-group anger, mistrust and social distance (Mabry and Kiecolt 2005). While South African affirmative action policies are active and enforced, the policies are hinged on retained apartheid classification. South African racial classifications are based on political and economic decisions (Fischer 2007). Categories remain

illogical, incomprehensive, inaccurate and inappropriate due to universal lack of concord. The apartheid government fortified and enforced hierarchical categorisation through severe legislation. Any present-day reparative initiatives therefore need to preserve the illogical classification, in order to ensure that respective representative groups are fairly compensated (Fischer 2007). This causes continued present-day friction and racism between Whites, Blacks, Indians and Coloureds. Coupled with such racial inequalities, at the end of the apartheid era, South Africa had the highest reported income inequality in the world (Seekings and Nattrass 2005).

A review of the literature of the histories of the majority of South Africans, and the minorities of the US, shows that the lack of equal educational opportunity in higher education results from historical and present-day discriminatory policies and practices. Educational and employment opportunities for African-Americans have improved substantially since 1960, but unequal career advancement persists, when compared to their European-American counterparts (Holmes 2004).

### **SOCIAL COMFORT: CONCEPTS, PROCESSES AND THEORIES**

In this article, we use a number of interrelated and often interchangeable concepts in order to explore the issue of social comfort, which we define as an individual's feeling of rapport and social ease with another individual or a group of individuals. Allied concepts to social comfort that we use are social proximity, social distance, and homophily. Social proximity, whether close or distant, affects how individuals interact in diverse settings. Individuals or the groups they represent are allowed close, while others are maintained at a distance. Social distance is the magnitude of discord, manifested in the extremities of contact. Social distance, in its inception phase, was considered an assessment tool for researching the level of intimacy, or intensity of rejection, between the members of widely-represented culture groups (Sherif 1973). Social distance is a measure of social proximity, and a tool in the study of inter-group conflict. Hagendoorn and Hraba (1987) assert that social distance is about in-group–out-group differentiation. An in-group refers to those who are included and not held distant; an in-group can range from the individual's family, neighbourhood, city, nation, race, to all of humankind (Houlette, Gaertner, Johnson, Banker, Riek and Dovidio 2004). The in-group is the collective name for those with whom the individual has high social comfort, security and no social distance (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie and Yong 1986); favoured treatment of the in-group is referred to as differential positive evaluation (Brewer and Gaertner 2004). The out-group is the collective name for those with whom the individual has low social comfort, and is generally characterised by unfavoured treatment (Brislin et al. 1986). The out-group represents those who are either eliminated or avoided at all costs, not to be trusted, not allowed in-group membership and socially held distant.

Group membership yields a sense of identity and self-worth (Cohen and Garcia 2005) to the degree that when other group members succeed, an increase in self-esteem follows; and an attempt is made at inter-group orientation (Hong et al. 2003).

Duckitt and Mphuthing (1998) claim that the stronger the in-group representation, the stronger the inter-group bias. Various theories discuss in-group/out-group behaviours. For instance, *social identity theory* operates from internal to external where in-group strength is established, followed by a feeling of superiority over the out-group (Duckitt and Mphuthing 1998); the stronger an individual feels about the in-group, the greater the aversion will be towards the out-group. Conversely, *realistic conflict theory* operates from external to internal where a competitive out-group sparks in-group cohesiveness (Duckitt and Mphuthing 1998).

Group position is established by four different components (Blumer 1958), namely: (1) in-group supremacy; (2) out-groups are repugnant; (3) in-group entitlement to resources and rights; and (4) the out-group is in competition for resources and rights and a 'perceived threat'. Brewer (1968) flags similarity and threat through competition as salient determinants of social distance. Common types of classification for majority or minority groups can be according to numerical value, status or power strength; a numerical minority can be a status and power majority, as was the case with the Brahmins in India or Whites in South Africa during the apartheid era (Simon, Aufderheide and Kampmeier 2004). A key difference between the countries studied in the article is that South Africa has a Black majority, while the US has a Black minority.

## **METHOD**

### **Scale development**

The original Bogardus Social Distance Scale consists of seven, intervalled graduations relating to social relationships, designed to measure race and national groups (Wark and Galliger 2007). If an individual has zero social distance, it implies that the individual is willing to marry someone from a particular out-group; whereas if an individual has maximum social distance, it implies that the individual has the desire to exclude such an out-group member from the country.

Byrnes and Kiger adjusted the original Bogardus scale in 1988, followed by adjustment by Rollock and Vrana in 2005. The scale contains 16 statements, describing different interaction scenarios, with the primary goal to ascertain the 'emotional ease' of interracial interaction (Rollock and Vrana 2005, 394). Each of these statements is evaluated on seven Likert-type graduations, ranging from 'very uncomfortable' to 'very comfortable'. On the measurement instrument, the scope ranging from 1 ('I would be very uncomfortable') to 7 ('I would be very comfortable'), is followed by 16 statements describing both intimate and non-intimate social interaction scenarios. For example, 'I would be ... (level of comfort) ... having a Black person as my dance partner'. For this particular study, minor contextual word adjustments were made to the Rollock and Vrana Social Scales: 'Governor of my state' was amended to read 'Premier of my province', and 'President of the United States' changed to 'President of South Africa'. The responses to the measurement instrument were captured in the

online survey system and exported into Excel. Sufficient data screening was done to ensure consistency and validity of the data entries, before it was exported to SPSS; the output is discussed in the research findings section of the article. Factor analysis was used in this particular study, as the original questionnaire had to bridge the difference between US and South African culture differences.

### **Means and standard deviation**

The means indicate the average answers by the whole sample or sub-group, and the standard deviation provides additional information on the spread of the whole group/sub-sample. The means are therefore indicative of the trends in survey answering. The measurement instrument allowed seven equal-interval answer options. A mean of 4.5 would indicate a high level of consistency in answering. Means of 1, 2, 6 and 7 would indicate extreme answering between various respondents. Extreme answers would lead to an unreliable mean, but able to be detected by a high standard deviation.

### **Factor analysis: Measurement instrument correlation**

The first step was to ascertain the association between the 16 variables on the measurement instrument. The high correlation variables yielded main categories and were extracted by using a rotation component through SPSS, retaining all Eigen values higher than 1. Two categories emerged, namely *non-intimate* and *intimate*. In cases where the weighting was high on both *non-intimate* and *intimate* (they both had to be above 40%), they were regarded as *dual*.

### **Cronbach's alpha**

After establishing components 1, 2 and 3, as *non-intimate*, *intimate* and *neither intimate nor non-intimate*, Cronbach's alpha was utilised to determine the internal consistency of the measurement instrument's variables. A high Cronbach's alpha indicated a strong correlation between component variables; essentially indicative of the health of the factor. The strength of relationship within the factor was therefore measured and analysed. A Cronbach's alpha of above 70 per cent was considered good.

### **Participants**

The US Social Distance study was conducted at a predominantly White, Midwestern university. The 16-item Revised Social Scale was administered to 184 African-American male and female undergraduate students. The South African study was conducted at the University of Cape Town, and comprised of: (1) primary quantitative data collection through the administering of the 16-item revised scale, and (2) a secondary qualitative component in the form of interviews and a focus group. The revised social scale yielded a sample size of 405 male and female undergraduate students, of whom 310 were Blacks and 95 were Whites. Participants were from a wide range of disciplines rather than from one isolated faculty.

The quantitative data were analysed in the same statistical manner as the study by Rollock and Vrana (2005), and therefore contained like-minded base figures for accurate correlations. The correlation coefficient between the two variables was noteworthy in terms of how strongly the South African setting compared with the US setting. The quantitative data were measured on an equal-interval scale (Leedy and Ormrod 2005).

## FINDINGS

### US and South African survey correlation

A correlation can be made between Black South African undergraduate students and African-American undergraduate students. The US-based study focused specifically on measuring African-American in-group and out-group attitudes and for this reason a White South African and European-American correlation was not achievable.

Table 1: Black South African attitude toward out-group

Rotated Component Matrix					
Variable	Means	Std Deviation	Factor Analysis components		
			1	2	3
As the Premier of my province	5.55	1.638	.636	.495	.138
Rent my house from me	5.83	1.483	.384	.688	.150
As a dance partner	5.72	1.663	.209	.605	.483
As the President of South Africa	4.99	1.858	.630	.261	.264
My personal physician	6.13	1.354	.269	.773	.252
As my spiritual counsellor	5.56	1.733	.593	.344	.296
As someone I would date	5.38	1.789	.230	.246	.855
As my roommate	5.53	1.771	.442	.332	.534
Sit next to me in a dining hall	6.08	1.412	.265	.653	.364
Marry a brother or sister of mine	5.51	1.775	.452	.298	.610
As my academic advisor	6.28	1.292	.281	.763	.200
Kiss me in public	4.95	2.172	.147	.189	.747
As a lover	5.28	1.898	.164	.229	.887
On a sports team with me	6.31	1.317	.174	.804	.297
Baby-sit my child	5.59	1.772	.666	.316	.305
Interact with me as a police officer	5.22	1.993	.795	.120	.084
My supervisor at work	-	-	-	-	-
	<b>5.61</b>	<b>1.68</b>			

Table 2: African-American attitude toward out-group

Rotated Component Matrix				
Variable	Means	Std Deviation	Factor Analysis components	
			1	2
As the Governor of my state	4.86	1.65	.782	.321
Rent my house from me	5.24	1.81	.638	.387
As a dance partner	4.20	2.06	.461	.567
As the President of the United States	4.83	1.66	.784	.331
My personal physician	5.41	1.67	.783	> .30
As my spiritual counsellor	3.89	2.19	.505	.565
As someone I would date	3.23	2.22	> .30	.910
As my roommate	4.28	2.08	.423	.628
Sit next to me in a dining hall	5.58	1.56	.704	> .30
Marry a brother or sister of mine	3.72	2.22	.391	.727
As my academic advisor	5.26	1.57	.773	> .30
Kiss me in public	2.79	2.19	> .30	.874
As a lover	2.95	2.31	> .30	.895
On a sports team with me	5.71	1.51	.744	> .30
Baby-sit my child	5.58	1.56	.624	.513
Interact with me as a police officer	-	-	-	-
My supervisor at work	4.98	1.57	.777	.328
	4.53	1.86		

### Inter-correlations among Social Scales: South Africa

Table 3 correlates Black South African student in-group and out-group results, also indicating the split by gender.

Table 3: Inter-correlations among Social Scales: Black South Africans

Instrument	N	Mean	Std Deviation	In-group Total	Out-group Total	Out-group Intimate	Out-group Non-intimate
<b>In-group total</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>6.12</b>	<b>1.14</b>	-	<b>0.700**</b>	<b>0.483**</b>	<b>0.615**</b>
Men	129	6.21	0.99	-	0.670**	0.539**	0.560**
Women	154	6.10	1.13	-	0.755**	0.425**	0.700**
<b>Out-group total</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>5.59</b>	<b>1.26</b>	<b>0.703**</b>	-	<b>0.824**</b>	<b>0.842**</b>
Men	129	5.46	1.29	0.670**	-	0.882**	0.851**
Women	154	5.63	1.21	0.755**	-	0.786**	0.834**
<b>Out-group intimate</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>5.19</b>	<b>1.77</b>	<b>0.483**</b>	<b>0.824**</b>	-	<b>0.514**</b>
Men	129	5.18	1.74	0.539**	0.882**	-	0.614**
Women	154	5.12	1.81	0.425**	0.786**	-	0.446**
<b>Out-group non-intimate</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>5.40</b>	<b>1.45</b>	<b>0.615**</b>	<b>0.842**</b>	<b>0.514**</b>	-
Men	129	5.31	1.43	0.560**	0.851**	0.614**	-
Women	154	5.50	1.47	0.700**	0.836**	0.446**	-
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)							

The Cronbach's alpha for total correlation was 87.1 per cent with male consistency of 88.8 per cent and female consistency of 86.2 per cent. If the results for out-group total had had a high correlation with in-group totals, it would have implied similar social proximity, as per the answered measurement instrument. The disparity between the two suggests that Black South African students have low in-group social distance and, in comparison, high out-group social distance; it implies that they are very comfortable allowing their in-group in close social proximity, as opposed to a higher level of social distance orientation towards the out-group, namely White students.

### Inter-correlations among Social Scales: US

Table 4 correlates African-American student in-group and out-group results, also indicating the split by gender.



Table 4: Inter-correlations among Social Scales: African-American

Instrument	N	Mean	Std Deviation	In-group Total	Out-group Total	Out-group Intimate	Out-group Non-intimate
In-group total	237	6.46	1.03	-	.30***	.08	.44***
Men	85	6.56	0.80	-	.23**	.11	.34**
Women	152	6.41	1.15	-	.33***	.05	.48***
Out-group total	237	4.57	1.43	.30***	-	.83***	.90***
Men	85	4.75	1.51	.23**	-	.90***	.92***
Women	152	4.46	1.38	.33***	-	.79***	.89***
Out-group intimate	237	3.54	1.94	.08	.88***	-	.58***
Men	85	3.66	2.19	.11	.92***	-	.70***
Women	152	2.98	1.98	.06	.85***	-	.50***
Out-group non-intimate	237	5.01	1.37	.40***	.96***	.58***	-
Men	85	5.39	1.28	.29**	.96***	.70***	-
Women	152	5.23	1.34	.44***	.95***	.50***	-

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

If the results for out-group total had had a high correlation with in-group totals, it would have implied similar social proximity, as per the answered measurement instrument. The area highlighted in grey (Table 4) leads the researchers to believe that there is a disparity – suggesting that African-American students have low in-group social distance and, in comparison, high out-group social distance. This simply implies that they are in close social proximity with other African-Americans, and have more distant attitudes toward their out-group.

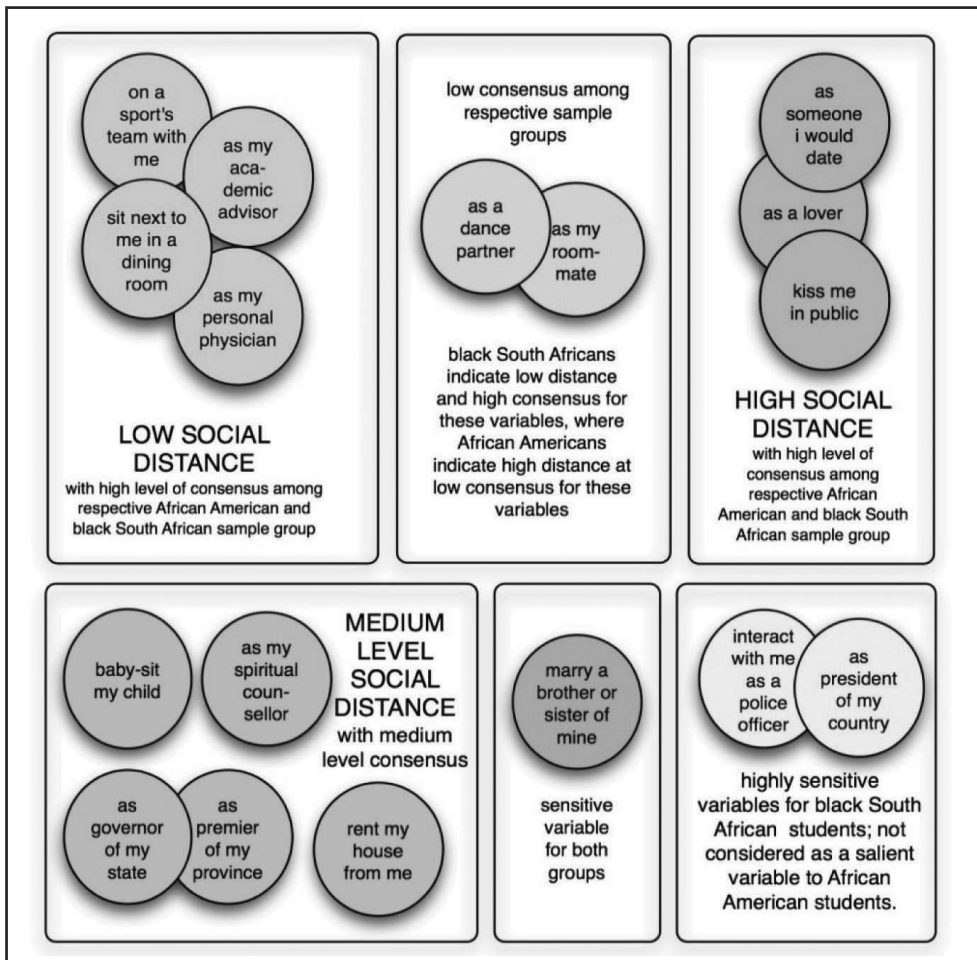


Figure 1: Social Distance means and volatility

### Hypothesis on Social Distance: South African and US comparison

Null Hypothesis 1: there is no correlation between social distance levels for Black South African students and African-American students.

Alternative Hypothesis 1: there is a correlation between social distance levels for Black South African students and African-Americans students.

Due to cultural differences, the way in which variables were reviewed would not necessarily be similar for both South African and US university settings. The Black South African student attitudes toward out-groups yielded three factors or components, namely, *intimate*, *non-intimate* and *neither intimate nor non-intimate*. The African-American student attitudes toward out-groups yielded two factors or components, namely, *intimate* and *non-intimate*. Each respective study contained a variable that was not common or shared, which meant that there were 15 shared variables to compare.

The overlapping *non-intimate* variables included: ‘on a sports team with me’, ‘baby-sit my child’, ‘as my roommate’, and ‘as the president of South Africa/the United States’. ‘Rent my house from me’ was an undecided variable for Black South Africans (with a 68.8% commonality), opposed to 63.8 per cent confirmed as *non-intimate* by African-Americans.

Black South Africans indicated a component overlap (*non-intimate* and *neither intimate nor non-intimate*) for the following: ‘as Premier of my province’ (63.6% *non-intimate* and 49.5% undecided commonalities), compared to 78.2 per cent *non-intimate* for ‘Governor of my state’, according to African-American students.

Black South Africans indicated a *neutrality* in the ‘as my personal physician’ variable with a 77.3 per cent surety, whereas African-Americans indicated a 78 per cent skew towards *non-intimate*. Similar ratios were noted for ‘sit next to me in a dining hall’; Black South Africans indicated 65 per cent *neutrality* whereas African-Americans indicated a 70.4 per cent *non-intimate* regard. Finally, the ‘as an academic advisor’ variable yielded a similar trend in ratio; 76.3 per cent *neutral* for Black South Africans and 77.3 per cent *non-intimate* for African-Americans.

African-Americans indicated ‘as a dance partner’ to be both *intimate* (with 56.7% common view) and *non-intimate* (with 46% common view), with a stronger weighting towards the former. Black South Africans were predominantly undecided or *neutral* (with 68.8% common view), followed by *non-intimate*. There was almost a fifty-fifty split between *non-intimate* (with 50.5% common view) and *intimate* (with 56.5% common view) for the ‘as my spiritual counsellor’ variable among African-Americans. In comparison, Black South Africans indicated this variable as *non-intimate* with 59.3 per cent as a percentage of commonality.

The shared *intimate* variables included: ‘as someone I would date’, ‘kiss me in public’, and ‘as a lover’. The ‘marry a brother or sister of mine’ variable was regarded as predominantly *intimate* (South Africa: 61%; US: 72.7%), but with a strong overlap towards *non-intimate* for both respective studies (South Africa: 45%; US: 39%).

Seven of the 15 variables were the same for both sub-samples. Similarity in social intimacy and non-intimacy attitudes and views therefore existed between Black South Africans and African-Americans, but the overlap of just below 50 per cent did not make this a predominant overlap.

## Means and T-STATS

A second-tier reviews and compares the average means, and their respective level of variance. A respective view of variance indicated a wide spread in the US study: eight of the 15 questions indicated a standard deviation  $> 2$ , as opposed to only two variables with such a spread in the South African study. The variability in the US answers was therefore greater. However, the existence of a middle/neutral component, or factor, may have potentially hid a lot of variance in the South African study.

Predominantly low comfort in intimate interaction with the out-group was most apparent in the US study, but these also had the highest standard deviation, which indicated an extreme spread of social comfort.

The lowest level of out-group comfort among Black South Africans was for the 'kiss in public' variable, where the mean was 4.95 at a standard deviation of 2.172. It was salient to note that Black South Africans yielded an in-group comfort level of 5.59 at a 2.036 variability, which suggested a general lack of comfort with public demonstrations of affection/intimacy, which may have related back to cultural background. The other means, for the rest of the variables, were all above 5, with contained standard deviations.

### Inter-correlations

Black South African student inter-correlations between in-group totals and out-group totals indicated the following salient points:

Out-group *intimate* (82.4%) and *non-intimate* (84.2%) respective totals had a strong/high respective correlation with the out-group total. This indicated regularity and similarity, in which both *intimate* and *non-intimate* questions were answered.

Out-group total and in-group total indicated a relatively strong correlation, but the root of this resided in Black South African male out-group *intimate* (53.9%) and *non-intimate* levels (56%) in comparison with female out-group *intimate* (42.5%) and *non-intimate* levels (70%). Black South African males maintained almost-equal social distance in answering both *intimate* and *non-intimate* variables. While Black South African females maintained a higher social distance on *intimate* variables and a lower social distance on *non-intimate* variables.

The high correlations between the out-group total and the out-group *intimate* and *non-intimate* were partly due to the existence of the third *neutral* component (*neither intimate nor non-intimate*), as a result of factor analysis for Black South African student attitudes toward the out-group.

African-American student inter-correlations between in-group totals and out-group totals indicated the following salient points:

The low correlation between out-group totals and in-group totals indicated that African-American students were socially close to the in-group and more distant, in comparison, to the out-group.

There was a high correlation between out-group totals for both *intimate* and *non-intimate* out-group variables. This indicated that students followed the same trend in answering questions. Initially, this perplexed the researchers: African-American students indicated low means in out-group scenarios which indicated high social distance, but with high standard deviations indicating a large variance in responses. The only way in which all three components and their status (high correlation, low means and high standard deviation) could link was if there were clusters of extreme responses.

The overlap between how Black South Africans and African-Americans view *intimate* and *non-intimate* issues were similar by almost 50 per cent, but there were

significant areas that were not shared/did not overlap; which made entire similarity questionable.

The average mean for the Black South African sub-sample was 5.61 with a standard deviation of 1.68, compared to a mean of 4.53 for the African-American sample, and an accompanying standard deviation of 1.86. For the reviewed variables, Black South Africans showed a higher level of inter-group social comfort, but the African-American sample indicated volatility/extreme answers due to the high variance in some question responses.

Combining inter-correlations for both groups, it emerged that Black South African students indicated a higher correlation and smaller difference between in-group and out-group totals than African-Americans. In relation to the in-group, African-Americans kept the out-group further apart. In the case of Black South African males, they indicated a low out-group distance (67% when correlated with in-group), versus a 23 per cent out-group/in-group correlation with African-Americans.

It can be concluded that Black South Africans and African-Americans were not similar in their views on social interaction with the out-group. From the statistics in this particular study, Black South Africans were less socially distant than African-Americans. The Null Hypothesis was rejected and the Alternative Hypothesis was accepted at 0.05 per cent confidence level; though some correlation existed between Black South African students and African-American students, the overlap was marginal.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study showed that the African-American students' social distance toward the out-group is higher than the Black South African students' social distance toward White South Africans. The minority or majority status of the in-group and out-group is relevant to the study. A majority group can obtain this status purely by power or status, even if it is a numerical minority. Black South Africans are slowly regaining socio-economic ground through reparative initiatives in continual progress; although a numerical majority, power and socio-economic progress are what empowers and reverses the past. African-Americans are numerical, power, status and socio-economic minorities. Within the minority sub-group, they are also a waning minority group, which may lead to further in-group cohesion and out-group distance. Further study is required to ascertain the bearing of a threatened minority within a minority sub-group.

In the US, failure to acknowledge and repair damage through affirmative action discards the atrocities of the past as unimportant. Reparative initiatives in South Africa tend to lead to a perpetuation of the apartheid legacy through the retention of race classifications, in order to compensate adequately. This leads to maintained inter-group social distance and resentment, as new tensions are sparked among the previously disadvantaged.

Black South Africans who completed the survey indicated neutrality (neither

*intimate* nor *non-intimate*) for a dominant number of variables – demonstrating the subjectivity of *intimate* and *non-intimate* variables (Lambert 1952). The neutrality of intimacy levels may relate back to the fact that Black South Africans are more collectivistic and consensus-driven, whereas White orientation is traditionally equated with individualism (Van Dyk and Nefale 2005). Colonial and apartheid segregation could only have reinforced such orientations, since oppressed cohesive communal societies only become more cohesive, while segregated, class-oriented, threatened societies build ever higher walls and attempt to implement additional threat-response legislation (Kotze 1993).

African-American students indicated a more definitive split between *intimate* and *non-intimate* variables. Essentially the variables that would be non-invasive to direct personal space (academic advisor, sports team member, physician, seated next to in a dining room) or threatening in any way (supervisor at work, US President, Governor), scored low distance with high consensus. Conversely, extremely intimate variables indicated extremely high distance with low consensus. African-American students maintained three spheres of inclusion as far as the 16 social variables are concerned, namely: low social distance with high consensus; medium social distance with medium-level consensus; and high social distance with low consensus. African-American students, on average, indicated the widest spread from ‘most comfortable’ to ‘most uncomfortable’ towards the out-group, when compared to the respective out-group attitudes maintained by Black South Africans.

Black South African students maintained low social distance with either high consensus or medium-level consensus for all the *non-intimate*, *neither intimate nor non-intimate*, and *both intimate and non-intimate* (weighted towards *non-intimate*) variables. The exceptions were with two *non-intimate* variables that are maintained at high social distance, namely, ‘interact with me as a police officer’, and ‘as President of South Africa’. Black South African students indicated high social distance (with volatile answers) when concerned with out-group variables, ‘as President of South Africa’ and ‘interact with me as a police officer’. Both these variables were flagged as *non-intimate*.

African-Americans indicated lower out-group social comfort, which Rollock and Vrana (2005, 409) account to ‘current and historical segregation’ that necessitates self-concept and categorisation through in-group coherence. Historically, Black South Africans have a memory bank filled with bad experiences (either directly or parentally inherited) linked to a White South African President, and a predominantly antagonistic White apartheid police/military force, not interested in, and purposefully violating, the safety/rights of Black South African citizens. The qualitative data support this: Black students still allude to the apartheid past, while White students indicate a classical colour-blind behaviour. This aligns with the literature; after-effects of racial abuse can linger until the fourth generation for both perpetrator and victim (Kaslow 1999), and general societal scrutiny of past-perpetrator groups leads to aversive racism or race-neutrality (Gushue 2004). The African-Americans included the variable ‘President of the United States’ in medium social distance sphere. This

is potentially because White American Presidents are not considered either overtly racist or a direct threat, as is the case with White South African Presidents.

A quantitative data yield of low social distance with high consensus for the variable ‘as my academic advisor’, was noted for both African-American and Black South African students. In a South African setting, qualitative data indicated prejudiced lecturers; Black students expressed and perceived subtle racism towards them in class/lecture settings. The theoretical review also demonstrated lecturer-to-student prejudice. There was therefore a discrepancy between the three data components.

The ‘kiss me in public’ variable yielded interesting aspects. It is questionable whether South Africans are reticent to receive public affirmation. Even students who responded with ‘most comfortable’ for all the social scenarios or variables, and towards both the in-group and out-group, would answer ‘most uncomfortable’ for the ‘kiss me in public’ variable (again for both the in-group and out-group). Two respondents indicated, in the comment section, that they were specifically averse to public affection, regardless of in-group or out-group. African-American students were unequivocal in their distinction between *intimate* and *non-intimate*, specifically when it denoted romantic involvement.

Homophily can also be a strong motivation for limited social comfort. The formation of homophilous groups can range from innocent to insidious. According to the literature review, it can purely and solely be in-group preference, where the out-group is held at a social distance purely as a result of innocent preference or by default. It can also be due to class stratification, which is simply a continuation of segregationist forces from the past.

African-Americans as a numerical minority group indicated ‘uniformly high in-group scores’ (Rollock and Vrana 2005, 409). It is questionable whether African-Americans are homophilous through primarily being in-group cohesive, or whether they are cohesive with the in-group because they are responding to their threatened status as a minority group. A clear distinction is made between out-group *intimate* and *non-intimate* social interaction, while no such distinction is made when considering the in-group (Rollock and Vrana 2005).

Social distance in a South African setting is therefore influenced by cultural attributes, group-specific historical details, and homophilous-orientation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current study highlighted the geographically and historically embedded nature of social comfort, when it was explored in relation to ethnicity in the US and South African contexts. Very few cross-national comparisons exist in this respect, hence we offer an understanding on how ethnic diversity operates in the higher education sector and inform efforts to manage student diversity in the sector.

The quantitative and qualitative data link in with theory, and have potentially enlarged the view of social distance in the context of oppressive history and its multi-generational after-effects, minority-majority psychology, homophilous interaction preference, socio-economic stratification, individualism and collectivism. The

respective South African and US studies clearly highlight high levels of comfort in certain social situations and low comfort in others. Increased revelation regarding the rationale underscoring certain social situations, that is more comfortable than others, will enable the development of models or frameworks to enable effective group work in diversified work groups, school settings, university settings and other forms of social interaction.

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