

Off-space and on the sidelines: A reply to Marx and Feltham-King



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Marx and Feltham-King offer an insightful critique of the special focus section of the *South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP)* (volume 35 number 3 2005) on 'racial' contact and isolation in everyday life. They note several methodological limitations of the studies presented and point to some potential misinterpretations of the overall message. In this response, we clarify and defend the rationale of the special focus section and acknowledge its limitations. We also argue, however, that Marx and Feltham-King's commentary fails to offer any forward-looking vision of how to develop psychological research on 'race segregation' in South Africa. What is required now is a concrete programme of work that advances our knowledge of the issues at the heart of this exchange.

Keywords: isolation; methodology; race; racialisation; racism; segregation; South Africa

Marx and Feltham-King (2006) criticise a 'special focus section' that we had recently edited on behalf of the *South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP)*, which was titled 'Race, interaction and isolation in everyday life'. Although they accept the potential importance of this topic and of the focus on embodied practices of contact and segregation, they are sceptical about the value of some of the work presented. Importantly, they also point to several ambiguities and potential misinterpretations of the overall message of the special focus section. We welcome the opportunity to respond.

The usual response to this kind of critique is a step-by-step rebuttal. On this occasion, however, we find ourselves in agreement with some of the points that Marx and Feltham-King raise. Our reply is therefore a bit mixed. At times, we shall defend the work presented in the special interest section; at times, we shall try to clarify its rationale and acknowledge its limitations; and at times, space permitting, we shall

even take the Marx and Feltham-King position a little further. There will be a ‘sting in the tail’ for Marx and Feltham-King, however. We shall argue that their commentary fails to offer any forward-looking vision of how to develop research on ‘race segregation’ in South Africa.

SCOPE AND FOCUS

The title of our special focus section was deliberately general. Its aim was to draw as wide a readership as possible to an important topic. As spelt out in our introduction and in the published call for papers, however, its underlying rationale and focus were narrower. The point was never to provide an exhaustive ‘stock take’ of segregation in post-apartheid South Africa – a vast undertaking that could not possibly be accomplished by a few empirical studies and commentaries. Instead, we wanted to explore *some* patterns of contact and isolation, focusing on settings where a degree of desegregation has supposedly occurred. The emphasis was deliberately placed on processes operating at a comparatively fine-grained and ‘micro-ecological’ level. This is because the bulk of research on segregation has been located at a much coarser level of ‘granularity’ (Montello, 2001). As a result, our capacity to understand its nature and impacts at the scale of face-to-face encounters has been impoverished.

Of course, if one shines a spotlight on relations at this level and in a few situations, then other important forms of segregation necessarily remain more in the shadows. Marx and Feltham-King are quite right when they suggest, for example, that many South Africans (continue to) experience segregation in far starker terms than our focus section suggests. The power-geometry of the apartheid city – and the forms of poverty it entrenched – continues to exercise a strong hold over South African life. Many people lead lives that are a world away from university dining-halls or holiday beaches or ‘integrated’ classrooms. In presenting research on relations in these ‘privileged’ spaces, we did not intend to diminish the significance of other forms of segregation.

METHODOLOGY

Marx and Feltham-King’s second set of criticisms focuses on the methodological limitations of the research papers as a set. We have some reservations about this aspect of their commentary. It seems to us, for instance, that general indictments of ‘positivist’ or ‘quantitative’ or merely ‘observational’ research conceal as much as they reveal about the interrelations between (meta)theory, method and data in the study of segregation. Nor do we accept the idea that particular methodological frameworks are inherently more reactionary than others, as Marx and Feltham-King sometimes seem to imply (e.g., “the editors’ decision to limit the research presented in the special focus section to quantitative and largely observational research is unfortunate given the political importance of the topic”, p. 454). For example, some of the most radical work on segregation has taken the form of quantitative surveys of the organisation

of relations in metropolitan America. Massey and Denton's (1993) work – to cite a well-known illustration – has powerfully demonstrated the association between 'race', segregation and the concentration of poverty.

Having said that, we accept that the special focus section would have benefited from research using a wider range of methodologies. As editors, we were hoping – as it turned out, in vain – to include a number of qualitative pieces, which would certainly have enriched the overall message of the issue. Ultimately, however, the submissions that we received were rooted predominantly in a 'quantitative' tradition of research. Moreover, as noted both in our introduction and in Foster's (2005) closing, some of them emphasised description rather than explanation or interpretation, focusing on what people do rather than on how they 'make sense' of what they do (however, see Durrheim, 2005; Finchilescu, 2005).

This methodological feature had benefits but also limitations. On the positive side, the work in the special issue involved creativity at the level of methodology – precisely because the researchers were forced to grapple with the challenges of 'describing' naturalistic contact. The mapping and digital photography techniques used by Schrieff, Tredoux, Dixon, and Finchilescu (2005) and Tredoux, Dixon, Underwood, Nunez, and Finchilescu (2005), for example, represented valuable attempts to render visible a set of dividing practices that have rarely been studied by psychologists. In so doing, they told us something important about the potentially 'cosmetic' nature of desegregation, even within supposedly integrated settings. Of course, as with any methodology, this style of work also has the potential to obscure, simplify or misrepresent its research object. In its reliance on techniques that quantify 'racial' interaction, for example, it may reproduce some problematic assumptions about the nature of racial categories. This brings us to the third and most trenchant of Marx and Feltham-King's criticisms.

'RACE' AND RACIALISATION

Marx and Feltham-King take particular exception to the treatment of the concept of 'race' in research presented in the special issue. In a nutshell, some of the studies used methods in which the analyst both presupposed and imposed 'race' categories. The danger here is that 'race' becomes implicitly naturalised, treated as a pre-given feature of the social landscape in which observations, photographs or surveys are collected. By implication, the social and political construction of 'race' categories is concealed and their complex interrelations with other category systems (e.g., class and gender) marginalised.

This aspect of the Marx and Feltham-King commentary is useful. It raises a host of important issues that are impossible to address in any depth in this brief response. However, we concede that some of these issues could and should have been discussed more effectively within the body of the special interest section itself (and especially in our introduction). Marx and Feltham-King have done some of this work for us.

We would like to make a small addendum to their commentary, which is this: there are sometimes good methodological, theoretical and political grounds for adopting procedures that involve the classification of human beings into ‘races’. It allows researchers to bring into view, for example, forms of geopolitical organisation and exclusion that would otherwise remain hidden (even if, by so doing, they must also use reifications such as ‘white’ or ‘black’). In our experience, one is forced to abide by some tensions and compromises in this respect, particularly at the level of research practice. It will be no news to Marx and Feltham-King that the race categories imposed by the apartheid government remain important in South Africa, precisely to redress the violence brought about by that imposition. In this context, one wonders which view does more harm in contemporary South Africa: the quasi-liberal protestation about the meaning of race categories, which slides easily into a position that denies the social ‘reality’ of race, or the simplistic race classification that takes as its mark the legacy of apartheid South Africa?

Our point here is that the whole enterprise of studying ‘race segregation’ is inherently fraught. *Any* methodological procedures for studying this slippery object – quantitative or qualitative, observational or interpretative – will necessarily ‘fix’ the meaning of a more complicated, variegated and dynamic set of practices. The upshot here is that we need to be reflexive about the reifying potential of *all* forms of research practice that involve the concept of ‘race’. This is perhaps where the special issue could have been improved.

CONCLUSIONS

Having accepted the validity of a number of Marx and Feltham-King’s criticisms, we would like to end by looking to the future. Investigating segregation in post-apartheid society requires research that imaginatively grapples with the human geography of interaction and isolation across a range of contexts. Analysing how and with what consequences, people construct the meaning of concepts such as ‘race’ and ‘segregation’ is central to this project. It is equally important to analyse when, why and how segregated orders emerge out of the messy ensembles of material and bodily practices that shape everyday life. Ideally, the interrelations between both of these forms of social practice must be elucidated (cf., Durrheim & Dixon, 2005). And as psychologists, of course, it is also our job to clarify the role of what, for want of a better word, we might call ‘subjectivity’.

All of this is literally easier said than done. And here is the rub. The challenges presented by the task of *researching* and *explaining* the ‘realities’ of segregation in a given setting are quite different from the challenges presented by the task of formulating *post hoc critiques* of others’ research practices. The critical impulse is enormously important of course. It has informed our own engagements with so-called mainstream psychology in many ways (e.g., see Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). However, it

does not substitute for the more risky but constructive project of producing an empirically and theoretically rich *psychology*. In other words, it is not enough to strike notes of caution from the sidelines of research practice. Critique must be used to point the way forward and, in the final analysis, we find Marx and Feltham-King's commentary to be long on scepticism but short on vision.

For us the task that remains is clear. To paraphrase Blumer: our critics and collaborators alike now need to get the 'seats of their pants dirty' by developing concrete programmes of work that advance our knowledge of the issues lying at the heart of this exchange. Why? Although it no longer assumes the monolithic formations of apartheid, segregation remains present and pervasive in South Africa. It continues to shape the lives of all citizens (and many non-citizens). It operates across a range of scales and contexts, and remains entrenched within the morphology of urban and rural life. It estranges people from one another and sustains relations of advantage, discrimination and exclusion. Yet it does so in ways that often remain obscure, poorly understood and, above all, beneath the threshold of psychological inquiry. In this sense – and whatever its faults – the work published in our special interest section represents a small step forward.

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