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FRIENDSHIP

How students' understanding of class facilitates friendship

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this study is to investigate students' understanding of class and how this understanding facilitates the forming of friendships among students. The study makes use of undergraduate psychology students who were interviewed in focus groups of 3-6 people. Participants were asked questions pertaining to their friendships, specifically friendships in general and their understanding of class and the influence that class has on friendships. This study is important because much of the research in South Africa focuses solely on race and although there is research which indicates that it is beneficial to have intergroup friendships, the aspects which help or hinder these intergroup friendships are still not thoroughly investigated. The research was done drawing from Social Identity Theory and Contact Theory. The research shows how 'race' and class, as lived experiences, are still interrelated in South Africa as designed by apartheid. Class plays a significant role in facilitating and maintaining friendships, particularly where socio-economic status is concerned. Many participants reported that the people they had less in common with were people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and that they found interactions with such persons somewhat strained. This lends support to the idea of homophily where friendship is concerned. There were also certain contradictions that emerged about the role that the University played in forming friendships. However, while class does play an important role in facilitating friendship, it is not the only factor which contributes to friendship formation, as the study found.

## **Introduction**

In South Africa, “race”<sup>1</sup> has historically been an important category for classifying and creating social groups. “Race” is a social construct according to which culturally, ethnically and linguistically different groups are racialized. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, racial groups are the predominant social category used to assess intergroup relations (Durrheim & Dixon, 2010). Given the history of apartheid, race has largely been intertwined with class (Seekings & Natrass, 2005). The logic of apartheid created a situation where so called non-white groups were contrived to a life of poverty (working and lower classes), while white social and economic privilege allowed white people to form a part of the middle and upper class of South Africa. Since 1994, this logic has begun to show signs of disruption in both class and racial terms. For instance, there is an emerging black middle class (Alexander, Ceruti, Motseke, Phadi & Wale, 2013), which is a change from the historical class groups which existed in South Africa.

One of the preoccupations of post-apartheid South Africa is a question of transformation. Specifically, how we can transcend histories of race and class segregation. In this regard, this thesis focuses on student friendships and specifically how class may facilitate or hinder the formation of these friendships. The focus on student friendships is also important because of the general belief that younger people who did not live through apartheid ought not to form social relations that are typical of apartheid South Africa.

### **Framing and Defining Class**

Traditionally, “class” has been a word that people understand but have difficulty defining (Williams, 1985). Furthermore, the concept of class is susceptible to changing over time, as well as having different meaning in different contexts; for example, class may mean something different in the workplace and in the community. One way social class has been conceptualized is to divide it into three categories: upper class, middle class and lower class (Henry, 2014). These groups are predominantly determined by factors such wealth, income and education (Henry, 2014). However, I found this definition of social class to be an inadequate representation in a South African context. A better framing of class would be

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, race is understood as a social construct, based on hierarchal structures and is formed in relation to other factors such as social class. In my Results and discussion section, race is understood through the narratives provided by the participants. The racial categories which are discussed are drawn directly from the data and the terminology used by the participants (white, coloured, black). For ease of writing and reading, the quotation marks are dropped henceforth.

based on the four principal class types as described by Alexander et al. (2013): upper, middle and lower class, as well as working class and these groups are based on consumption and comparison to each other. Friendships are generally maintained through social interactions and in social settings (Blieszner & Adams, 1992), which are often compared to one another. For instance, certain restaurants or clubs may only be frequented by individuals of a particular class. Also, individuals tend to look at how others talk or dress and compare that to themselves and this has become the basis of categorising people into different classes (Alexander et al., 2013). Since social settings and social activities facilitate friendship, consumption and comparison are important aspects that need to be included in this definition of class.

### **Framing and Defining Friendship**

Friendship is an interpersonal relationship which forms between two people, that provides mutual benefits (Mannarino, 1980). Friendship in childhood is more simplistic with factors such as likeability, similarity and enjoyment seen as important in friendship formation (Bukowski, Motzoi & Meyer, 2009). Friendship becomes more complicated as people age, both in formation and maintenance of friendship. Friendships are conceptually divided into, three types: close friends, friends and acquaintances (Rybak & McAndrew, 2006). These three are differentiated by the level of intimacy and social support. People find their relationships with close friends provide more social support and are more intimate than with friends and acquaintances. Constant amongst these types when forming and maintaining friendships of homophily: the tendency for people to form bonds with people who they perceive to be similar to them (Kandel, 1978). This study is concerned with friendships as a social phenomenon by focusing on social categories such class and race, rather than personal categories. Since social class is a category which people can use to compare their self-concept with other people, it is conceivable that social class can be a similarity that matters to people when forming friendships. By extension, it is then possible that social class can hinder cross-group friendship if there is a perceived difference.

### **Defining Intergroup Relations**

In order to understand how friendships and interactions can occur between people of different social classes, a definition of intergroup relations is needed. Intergroup relations are those interactions that occur between groups, in terms of their group identification (Sherif, 1966). These intergroup relations can either be harmonious or result in conflict (Tajfel, 2010).

Conflict often arises when dominant social groups marginalize or oppress disadvantaged groups. The disadvantaged group may attempt to change their position against the resistance of the dominant group (Tajfel, 1974). This is particularly true when the disadvantaged group believes that the dominant group achieved their dominance through illegitimate means and that this dominance is not stable (Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr & Hume, 2001). Research has also shown that while forming a strong sense of identity with one's in-group is beneficial, this can also lead to in-group bias and as a result, lead to out-group discrimination (Brewer, 1999).

However, a strong bond towards a person's in-group can occur without out-group prejudice (Brewer, 1999; Halevy, Weisel & Bornstein, 2012). Therefore, while early literature assesses intergroup relations predominantly through the lens of intergroup conflict, recent literature, while still acknowledging intergroup conflict, is interested in a wider scope of how groups interact. This includes, but is not limited to: striving to achieve common goals (Pettigrew, 1998), empathy (Stephan & Finlay, 1999), cross-group friendships (Odell, Korgen & Wang, 2005) and segregation (Dixon, Tredoux & Clack, 2005). Therefore, for the purposes of this study intergroup relations are defined as the extent to which different groups (in this case social class groups) interact with each other when mediated by friendship ties.

This study is focused on friendship, both same-group and cross-group friendships and how these friendships and interactions are facilitated by class. Therefore, close attention has to be paid to intergroup relations. The study shifts attention from the harmony-conflict duality and turns to the question of class in a national context, where the gap between the rich and poor seems to be consistently growing.

### **Gaps in the Literature: The role of class in intergroup relations**

Due to the legacy of apartheid, social psychology in South Africa has almost exclusively looked at race relations (Foster & Louw-Potgieter, 1991; Duckitt & Mphuthing, 1998; Durrheim & Dixon, 2010; Dixon & Reicher, 1997). Since 1994, there have been more positive intergroup relations between racial groups, probably as a result of greater intergroup contact (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2010). Extensive research has been done on the importance of cross-group friendships (Pettigrew, 1998; Odell, Korgen & Wang, 2005; Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew & Wright, 2011) but the factors which influence cross-group friendships beyond those outlined by Allport (1954) and revised by Pettigrew (1998) and Pettigrew & Tropp (2006, 2008) remain largely under explored. Therefore, it would be insightful to

investigate the extent to which class facilitates friendship. Paying attention to class moves away from the dominant trend in South African social psychological research of an overly racial focus on intergroup relations. That is not to say that race is disregarded in this study. Rather, the interest is on race (an impermeable category) and class (a permeable category).

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to explore how class influences the formation of friendship groups and interactions amongst South African university students. This is done by understanding participants' views on class and how it facilitates opportunities for interaction and/or friendship.

### **Research Question**

How does the understanding of class amongst students influence the formation of friendship groups at the University of Cape Town (UCT)?

From my research question follows three theory questions. These theory questions were developed as a means to extract narratives surrounding the topics of class, friendship and the understanding of the relationship between the two. My theory questions were: 1) What are students' understanding of class and/or socioeconomic status? 2) Does students' understandings of class influence their choices of social spaces and who they decide to be friends with? and 3) Does students' understanding of class impact whether they remain friends or not?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The framework of this study is located in Social Identity Theory (S.I.T.) and Contact Theory.

#### **Social Identity Theory**

S.I.T. is a social psychological theory which assumes that there are socially constructed groups that exist and people are members of these groups (Hogg, 2006). These social groups are formed and have interactions with one another, which can be either harmonious or hostile (Kenworthy, Myers, Coursey, Popan & Hewstone, 2013). People are born into certain groups, such as gender or racial groups, whereas other social groups will be



chosen by the individual, based on person's cognitive identification and emotional evaluation of given groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If an individual does not achieve a positive self-identity through the current group that they are in, they will attempt to achieve a positive self-identity, either through social mobility or social change (Ellemers, Knippenberg & Wilke, 1990). Socially mobility refers to when an individual perceives that they can freely move between groups because of a permeable system (Tajfel, 1974). Social class is a permeable group, since an individual can earn more money, get a high status job, relocate to an affluent neighbourhood or change the way that they speak. All of these examples can be achieved on an individual level and therefore the person can move to a different social class by themselves. Social change, on the other hand, is a strategy that is used when groups are not permeable and therefore, the conditions of the group have to change as a whole in order for the individual to change their self-identity. Racial groups and gender groups are two examples of social groups that are not permeable, since it is very difficult for a person to change the status of the group on an individual level.

S.I.T. often looks at groups that are of unequal status and intergroup relations often based on these unequal interactions. In this situation, members of the in-group focus on positive similarities within the group that lead to a positive distinctiveness and focus on the differences of the out-group, which are often cast in negative terms, (Hogg, 2006). According to S.I.T., it is important for individuals to be part of social groups, in order to achieve a positive self-identity (Tajfel, 1974). S.I.T. assumes that people tend to look for similarities in other individuals and groups before becoming part of a particular group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).. While it is conceivable that individuals would prefer to interact with people from their own social group, rather than individuals from an out-group, this may not always necessarily be true.

Indeed, social groups, by their definition, lead to interaction, both within and between groups. Often, this interaction plays out based on whether the groups are equal in status or if there is a dominant group and a disadvantaged group, as well as how the in-group views itself in relation to the out-group (Brewer & Brown, 1998). Where class is concerned, dominance is often implicitly conveyed through things such as income, certain products, schools, residential and leisure spaces (Alexander et al., 2013). Indeed, access to these material and symbolic goods is mediating by class position that in turn becomes a criteria of including and excluding others.

## **Contact Theory**

The contact hypothesis was developed as a response to racism in America, which was intended to reduce prejudice amongst social groups (Allport, 1954). The hypothesis proposed that under certain ideal conditions, such as equal status, common goals, institutional support and perceived similarity between groups, contact would reduce or eliminate prejudice between the groups. While this hypothesis, which has led to what is now known as Contact Theory (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; 2008), was originally developed to reduce prejudice amongst social groups in conflict, particularly racial groups, it has been found to be effective amongst other social groups as well, such as transgendered individuals (Walch et al., 2012), people in the workplace (Novak, Feyes & Christensen, 2011) and people who have HIV/AIDS (Werth & Lord, 1992). A meta-analysis of 515 studies showed that there is an inverse relationship between contact and prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), thus making a strong argument that Contact Theory does reduce prejudice amongst groups.

Contact Theory is useful in this study, since in order for friendship to form, there must be contact. Therefore, when it comes to understanding how friendships are formed between members of different social groups, Contact Theory may provide a theoretical framework in which to understand the role of class in the formation of the friendship. Furthermore, friendships tend to occur between individuals who have traits in common (Blieszner & Adams, 1992) and contact has been shown to reduce feelings of prejudice and facilitate feelings of commonality (Allport, 1954). Therefore, it is useful to make use of Contact Theory, since both friendship and intergroup relations, as we are concerned with here, include contact between different individuals and social groups. Furthermore, a university is a good space to find narratives about intergroup contact because universities are typically diverse spaces.

### **Significance of study**

The study will attempt to understand what role class has in friendship formation and in turn, its role in intergroup relations. This investigation was preliminary in Zuma (2013) and this work attempts to investigate this further. In so doing, the research brings to focus a historical and current socio-political issue in South Africa- the inter-working of race and class at the micro-level of intergroup relations. Furthermore, this study is significant since it attempts to engage with an issue that is in many ways located at the heart of the transformation debate in South Africa today.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

#### **Qualitative research**

Qualitative research does not attempt to explain behaviour but rather attempts to understand how people make sense of the world using in-depth analysis (Willig, 2001). This type of research has research questions rather than hypotheses (Willig, 2001). Qualitative research was chosen for this study because the area of interest could be best understood through people's personal experience and preference for friendships, as well as how they interacted with people from other social groups. Also, it was important to understand how participants experience class in everyday interactions and how this experience of class influences the formation of friendships between different social groups.

A narrative discourse was used when collecting and analysing the data. Narrative approaches to qualitative research look to re-present experiences and make meaning of a person's "story" (Riessman, 2008). This approach let participants construct their perceived social class through their own narrative. It was through the participants' narratives about their everyday lives that their identifications with and understandings of class were better understood in the focus group context. The narrative approach was also valuable when it came to constructing an identity within a social context (Riessman, 2008). Since this study was done with university students, the university itself had an influence on the data and therefore the social context could not be excluded. The university experience influenced students' self-concept, as they were now young adults and all had their own student experiences, which in some ways were common but in other ways unique. Thus attention was paid to the friendships which students formed at university, as well as the friendships which were maintained, both at university and from school. Furthermore, the narrative approach was useful in systematically understanding what the participant regarded as social class and how it affected interactions with people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Lastly, the narrative approach was also useful for participants to describe what friendship meant to them.

#### **Sampling and Participants**

Non-probability purposive sampling was used for this study. This means that the participants were not chosen randomly. I made use of the SRPP system in the psychology

department at UCT which allows undergraduate psychology students to sign up for research participation. Non-probability sampling focuses on each individual's experience, rather than applying generalizability (Riessman, 2008). Twenty students between the ages of 18 and 23 were used. Fifteen of the students were female and five of them were male. Three of the participants identified themselves as being black, one as mixed race, four as coloured, eleven as white and one participant did not identify themselves with any racial category. University students were chosen because I was interested in the understanding of class and the friendships that students have at university.

### **Data Collection and Procedure**

Data collection occurred through the use of four focus groups which ranged from three to six participants per group. The focus groups were between an hour to an hour and a half and were recorded. The first focus group was a pilot that I conducted with my supervisor and I conducted the remaining three focus groups. Focus groups were chosen because they are a useful way of doing qualitative research, particularly when purposive sampling is being used (Liamputtong, 2011). The focus groups allowed me to get meaningful information about the role that class has in friendship formation. The research was conducted in a private room was facilitated in such a way that participants could respond openly and give their own opinion and experience. At the beginning of each focus group I handed out surveys collecting basic demographic information from the participants. I would also hand out an informed consent form, which the participants read signed before I conducted the focus group. I would then begin the discussions by asking the participants questions pertaining to their friendships and how they understood class. The interview questions were derived from the above stated theory questions. My interview questions were also guided by the responses that were given in various focus groups. The participants were compensated with SRPP points for participating in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The aim of the study was to see how students understood class and how that understanding influenced forming of their friendship groups. Narratives do not directly speak for themselves and must be analysed in order to draw systematic meaning from the data (Riessman, 2008). I decided to analyse this data using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used for analysing data which allowed me to generate relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was analysed as a whole, as opposed to breaking up the

participants' stories (Riessman, 2008), in order to understand what they believed class was and the role it played in forming friendships. The focus was on the content of the data, rather than the sequence or the language used. One of the key features of thematic analysis is looking for recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By using thematic analysis, I could assess the participants' personal views and experiences of class and interaction, how this could lead to friendship and how class could hinder friendship. The thematic analysis was done by making use of the various steps as described in Braun & Clarke (2006):

#### Phase 1: Familiarisation with data

The researcher must become deeply immersed in the data to ensure that there is a good understanding of the data. After I had conducted each focus group, I listened to the audio data and made a journal of my initial ideas regarding the data. The complete recorded data set was sent to an external company for transcription. I then manually checked the transcribed data against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy and that meaning was not lost in the transcription process.

#### Phase 2: Generating initial codes

While the researcher familiarises themselves with the data, they will search for basic patterns which will emerge from the data. These patterns will form the basis of initial codes for the data. These codes allow for the researcher to organize the data, with the eventual goal of creating even broader groups, which will become the themes of the data. I generated my initial codes going through the transcriptions and manually coding the data. I came up with a wide range of codes but was specifically looking for codes which could be grouped together and codes which formed patterns.

#### Phase 3: Searching for themes

This phase has the researcher placing the completed codes into relevant broader groups which are the themes. Codes may fit into main themes or sub-themes, or be discarded if they are not relevant. When looking for themes, I looked for the most relevant codes and how they related to my main research question and my theory questions.

#### Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Once the themes are created, they must be reviewed. Certain themes may not be worth keeping since there is not enough data or the data is too diverse. When I reviewed my themes,

I was specifically looking to see whether they were relevant to answering my research question. I did this by looking at the codes within my themes and assessed their importance by seeing their prevalence within the data. I had to ensure that the themes themselves were also relevant. Each theme had to be unique and representative of the data set as whole.

#### Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In this phase I paid special attention to sub-themes. Specifically, I checked that there were not too many sub-themes and that there was minimal overlapping. I want to stress that due to the mediating factor of class within friendship, there is mention of class within the friendship narratives but in these narratives class is described as a mediating factor, as opposed to the narrative which shows students' understanding of class. I named my sub-themes and themes in a manner which gives a simple explanation of what each section is trying to explain.

#### Phase 6: Producing the report

I produced the final analysis of my data in the form of my Honours thesis.

Another benefit of thematic narrative analysis is that it is not limited to a particular pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since this study was explorative, it made sense that the data analysis was not strictly tied to a particular theoretical framework. Even though I used S.I.T. and Contact Theory to formulate my research question, the responses from the participants did not all fall into these theoretical frameworks. By using thematic analysis, I was able to see which responses fitted into the aforementioned theoretical frameworks as well as explain and discuss data which did not fit into these frameworks.

### **Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher is a part of the study and is therefore not objective. Thus, it was important that I was aware of how I might influence the data and how I might perceive this data, due to my own personal subjectivity (Terre Blanche et al, 2006). Since thematic analysis was used, the themes were not explicitly stated by the data and I had to extract them through a relevant discourse. As the researcher, when facilitating the focus groups, it was imperative that I did not, consciously or otherwise, try to elicit particular responses from participants and I had to ensure that the focus group was directed in such a way that the participants felt that they could give their honest opinion. I also had to be aware

of my own views on how class facilitates friendship and intergroup relations and make sure that this was not the basis for themes I chose but that the themes were those experiences and perceptions that had been important and emphasised by the participants. It was important that I ensured that everyone had a fair opportunity to voice their opinion and that I did not give too much attention to a participant because they were overly talkative or that I did not give room to opinions that I disagreed with.

Furthermore, there were other considerations that I had to think about when conducting my research. Being a postgraduate student and from a previously disadvantaged background, as well as my accent are all attributes which the students could use to put me in a particular class and their narratives may very well have been directed by this. If the students felt that I could not relate to them or that I could not comprehend their understanding of class, they may have been less willing to give honest responses. It is important to note that even though I have acknowledged these issues of reflexivity, this does not mean that these issues were necessarily resolved. Rather, I am conveying a sense of awareness of my position in relation to the data and that qualitative research is never an objective enterprise.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are certain ethical considerations that need to be considered when dealing with human participants (Willig, 2001). There are fundamental ethical principles that a researcher must consider and are dealt with below.

#### **Respect for Participants**

Participants must be treated in a dignified manner and must be protected from unnecessary risks when they participate in research (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The research was conducted in a safe environment and participants were not exposed to any physical harm. However, the research topic dealt with issues that were potentially sensitive in nature, such as inclusion or exclusion of others due to social class and therefore I had to be aware of the language that was used to ensure that it did not cause offense.

#### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

Researchers must respect the privacy and confidentiality of a participant (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The data was kept in a secure location and pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity.

## **Informed Consent**

Participation was entirely voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any time. The informed consent form, which participants read and signed before the study commenced, described the study, stated the purpose of the research, outlined the benefits of the study, assured confidentiality and explained how the data would be analysed.

## **Deception**

There was no deception in this study.

## **Limitations of the study**

Since this study was qualitative in nature, the results may not be applicable to the general population. Furthermore, as a qualitative researcher, I am a part of the study my position within the study may have had an influence on the data. The limited word count means that I did not have the liberty to exhaustively discuss all of my findings.

## **Results and discussion**

The narrative themes were identified as follows: class narratives, friendship narratives and spatial narratives. The themes were designed to show how the narratives of the students constructed their understanding of class, how they made friends and the role that class played in friendship formation. All twenty students agreed that class is a construct which consists of different components and it was quite a challenge to definitively define what class is since it meant different things to different people. The factors which class consists of were constructed as overlapping and influencing one another. There were a wide range of concepts that were associated with class. However, there were a few concepts which seemed to recur more often than others and these are the concepts that I have paid particular attention to.

## **Class Narratives**

### *Socioeconomic status*

One of the first signifiers of class that was pointed out by the students was socioeconomic status (SES). Money played a large role in how students placed people in different classes. There was mention of the four groups of class proposed by Alexander et al.



(2013) and unanimously having lots of money was associated with someone who was part of the upper class. The following extracts highlight how SES for these participants is associated with class:

Sally: I feel like class is very much based on financial capabilities and socio-economic position rather than other things.

Jill: I mean obviously class the first thing about it is money and obviously it's unequal in South Africa.

Jill's narrative in particular alludes to the now common sense knowledge of class inequality in South Africa which despite policies such as Black Economic Empowerment remains a problem.

Furthermore, SES and the use of money were constructed as means of moving to a higher class and solidifying a person's place within a higher class. Money provides people with more opportunity and these opportunities include things such as, being able to afford a better education, going to places which are considered to be for people of a higher class and purchasing expensive material possessions. Therefore, it can be said that money is perceived as a means from moving from one class to another. Perhaps what is important about social and why people may seek social mobility strategies, as suggested by S.I.T., is because attached to class are life opportunities. Siya makes this point below:

To me it seems pretty obvious. I mean, the stereotype, I guess, what jumps out is if you have a higher socio-economic status, if you have more money, naturally you have more availability to more opportunities

The foregoing narratives appear to suggest that money or the lack thereof is perceived as a marker of class and that in turn class is often "gateway" to life opportunities. This becomes important when we look closer at the formation of friendships.

Interestingly, even university faculties are in socioeconomic terms by the participants. The most expensive faculties, engineering and medicine, were seen as the two faculties that were of the highest class. Even though there are students in these faculties that are paid for by bursaries, the narratives described these students as being marginalised, particularly if they were not white. In line with the class categorisation of faculties, the following narrative captures the overlap of race and class at the university. More than suggesting that black

students cannot afford medical is that they are also not intelligent enough to be at medical school. Thus, we see an interplay between an unfavourable interplay between class, race and intelligence, with regard to black students. In focus group three, a narrative came up discussing admission policies based on race. There were feelings of frustration and questioning the merit of students who were not white in the medical faculty:

Helen: Especially with the like entry level like things for the different races, like it's very easy as a white student to walk in especially to Med [medical campus] or something, to walk in and see a black student and be like 'do you really deserve to be here or have you just been handed this' and it's very difficult not to form stereotypes based on that because like you know so many people that have applied and just get rejected straight off the bat no matter how good their marks are and then like there are a lot of black students in my class that are literally just scraping by. So there is a stereotype mind set, whatever, stigma attached to it as a white student or coloured student, whatever, when you walk in and like you said when you see the different like races and you like okay, what is the reason that you are here?

Kate: And you also see your friends that haven't got a chance and you really feel like they did... they should have gotten a chance when you see there are other people that you don't feel like deserved the chance and then you will be just like kind of resentful towards them it's like 'uhhh... I know so many people that would have done so much better here.'

It is not difficult to see the implications of such narratives: Helen and Kate are unlikely to socialise with black students that they perceive to be undeserving to be at medical school and the chances of friendship appear out of the question. The question of class in these narratives goes beyond the question of friendship and rehearse a politics of black inferiority and resentment.

### *Race*

Race has been talked about extensively in South Africa and emerged prominently in the focus groups. The narratives constructed around race with regards to class were varied. Some students believed that race and class could not be separated, while others believed that race and class should be seen as two completely separate things. Other students

acknowledged that ideally race and class should be seen as separate constructs but the reality was that the majority of the upper class consisted of white people, while the majority of the working class consisted of black people and that being white was often associated with being of a higher class.

Shelley: I feel like class and race are two very different things. The one is just the colour of your skin and doesn't actually have an influence over your class.

Jill: Well, it's funny, when I hear the word class, I feel like I'm automatically primed to think race. Even though when I take time to think about it, I am like hang on a second, class ... like you're saying, I think more your socio-economic status rather than your race.

Ayanda: I think somewhat I still do attach it [class] to race as well because that... given... especially our country but I think that is changing [the attachment of race and class] somewhat it's... race is still attached to it for me.

These three different narratives point out the complicated relationship that race has with class. Part of the reason that it remains a challenge to separate race and class is due to the legacy of apartheid, as noted earlier. Many of the students believed this structure was still intact. Participants also believed that the middle class is probably the most racially diverse class category in South Africa. However, this is where the different views on race began to emerge. Jill for instance, believed that class should be seen as an individualistic attribute and generalisations regarding race and class should not be made. Ayanda, on the other hand, felt that due to the history of South Africa, it would be unrealistic to separate race and class because in her experience she found that the upper class consisted primarily of white people, whereas the working and lower class consisted primarily of black people.

Noteworthy in these narratives is that all three black students associated race with class and the students who believed that race and class are two separate constructs were white. There was also a large emphasis on the difficulty of separate race and class in South Africa. This was clear when two students from different focus groups who are not South African citizens expressed how they only noticed the relationship between race and class when they moved to South Africa.

Shelley: Well, it's funny, when I hear the word class, I feel like I'm automatically primed to think race. Even though when I take time to think about it, I am like hang

on a second, class... like you're saying, I think more your socio-economic status rather than your race. What does your race really have to do with it [class] except that it's a sort of a secondary factor but it's interesting that what jumps out is race ... it's like the first thing, whereas before I moved to South Africa, that [race] wouldn't have been something that I would have considered.

### *Language and accent*

Certain narratives paid particular attention to the language which students used to speak with each other and the manner in which they spoke. Many of the students agreed that better English was associated with a higher social class. Some of the narratives pointed out that good English is associated with a good education and is part of the reason why someone who speaks English well is considered of a higher class (see Zuma, 2013). Two students said that they observed, amongst white people, a class separation between English and Afrikaans. If someone was Afrikaans, it was found that such an individual faced ridicule and were considered of a lower class. Cassie's narrative found that it was the opposite within coloured families. Cassie experienced being looked down upon by her family because she and her brother were the only children raised speaking English and she felt inferior because the rest of her family spoke Afrikaans and she felt that they judged her for this reason.

Louise: I found that White people, there is a bit of a separation between English and Afrikaans and I find that a lot of English people look down upon Afrikaans people because they think, 'ah you can't speak properly' and then laugh at their accents and stuff, I think it's -.

Cassie: But that happens amongst the Coloureds as well -.

Louise: Does it?

Cassie: From my Mother, like my Mother and her siblings and their children, we were raised speaking English only but my Granny who I grew up seeing every single day of my life, she's Afrikaans and the rest of our family is as well. So when we have big family gatherings, everybody is speaking in Afrikaans and then there's us and like...so obviously I understand everything that they're saying but I communicate in English and so then they look down upon us because 'you are supposed to be our family' and 'why are you speaking English?'

Students who did not have an affluent accent were considered to be of a lower class. Cassie's narrative showed how she observed that the coloured and black girls in her school would change their accents when speaking to white teachers. She believed that it was seen as a way to gain respect from the teachers.

One thing I noticed in school, 90% of our teachers were white and majority of the girls in our school were black and in class, when a black girl would speak to the teacher, she automatically transforms. I think it's just a thing that they did and I don't know, maybe for them they perceived it [changing accent] as a way that maybe the teacher will respect them or something...

Again, these excerpts point to a complex interplay between race, class, language and accent as markers of similarity and difference; privilege and poverty; and social identities. Many of the narratives of the coloured and black students placed a lot of emphasis on accent

#### *Leisure spaces*

Participant narratives revealed that certain spaces were occupied by people from a particular class and as such, spaces could facilitate friendship for students of a similar class but they also could be a hindrance to friendship for people from difference classes. This is one way in which class becomes a criterion of inclusion and exclusion. Michael had friends with varying socioeconomic backgrounds and he found that his friend who had less money would only frequent certain spaces, namely those which were cheaper.

Ernest: Do you think that people of a certain class occupy certain places almost exclusively or not? What are your thoughts on that?

Michael: Yes it is definitely like that. I go to Pig & Swizzle now and then because I have a friend and that is the only place he goes to and so whenever I hang out with him I know where I'm going. If I'm hanging out with like my other mates I probably will go to like Long Street or something and it's quite difficult because I don't know whether I can say to this guy... I mean I have invited him out and often what ends up happening is like it becomes a more expensive night for me because I know that he can't afford to be like paying for drinks and entrance at these places and paying for taxi on top of that. So like I see him when I go to Pig & Swizzle and there are also places, I mean even inside like Obz [Observatory] you can see there is like - there is a place now you go to Stones you going to see

like the international students there's like well-off students. Then you go a little bit further down the street and there's like Masabuga, whatever, and there's like cheaper draughts there and people are just chilling out there, whatever. You can see that vibe definitely.

Here class is interpreted through spaces of leisure. Although Michael to race, it is not difficult to imagine a race/class overlap, in line with foregoing narratives and the history of South Africa. Tredoux and Dixon (2009) have pointed to the mapping leisure spaces in Long Street and in this study we see a corresponding class mapping of leisure spaces. Furthermore, this highlights again the role of class in creating life opportunities and shaping opportunity structures (see Zuma, 2013). We now turn to explore how all this has implications for the forming of friendships amongst students.

### **Friendship Narratives**

Students focused on their high school friendships, their university friendships and the current friendships that they had. The narratives described the different kinds of friendships which the students had and factors which strengthened or hindered friendship.

#### *Class and friendship*

All the participants agreed that in order for friendship to occur the students must have a common ground or be similar in some way. These narratives lend support to the concept of homophily as an important part of friendship formation, as has been found in other literature surrounding friendship formation (Kandel, 1978; McPherson et al., 2001). What was important for this study was identifying what these similarities were and how they related to class. Kelly's illustrates this line of thought below narrative:

With me, I went to a very diverse high school both class wise and racially but I think I tended to be...well...be friends with the people that were more in line with my class so like financially and culturally that sort of thing.

On the other hand, there were also narratives which did not explicitly state that class was the common factor that influenced the friendship but the role of class was apparent nonetheless. For instance, Jill talked about how she and many of her friends have cars and go out for drinks. Since they spent more time with each other, they became friends.

Jill: You're thinking on even like methods of transport because my friends have cars and so it became very convenient to spend time with these people because they had cars and they were like 'yes, we can fetch you, we can pick you up and do drinks'...so it's interesting commenting on what you're saying. I ended up spending a lot of time with these people and time strengthens relationships.

In this example, class appears material possessions (cars and money) that were important in facilitating friendship formation. The difference between Michael (in the preceding section) and Jill is that Michael is straggling two different class worlds and is this therefore 'going the extra mile' to maintain his friendships. Interestingly, this literally costs Michael in financial terms, a price that Jill does not have to pay. This highlights what Zuma (2013) calls the psychosocial labour of forming cross-group friendships. Here we can add that such a labour has class implications.

Once a friendship had been established, class played a significantly smaller role on whether a friendship was maintained. The excerpt below illustrates how class can work as obstacle to the formation of friendships amongst students.

Zinto: It kind of puts you into an awkward position even if you are like on the other end where you don't have money and you... I mean some friendships really become genuine 'if you don't have money, I have money' but there is a real connection, you are really friends. But, there's just that awkward part of 'oh, I'm going to hang out there' but I have to be like 'no, I can't make it' because I don't have the money to go there. So that sort of dynamic.

Helen: And you don't want to say but I can't afford it.

Zinto: Yes, you can't so you...

Inga: 'It doesn't matter. Oh shame.'

Zinto: Eventually you can't avoid it.

Nicole: That happened to me like my best friend was – she is rich like really rich and she was always like going to like these expensive places and I was like 'I can't go' and I'm like 'sorry' and then we just drifted apart like, we don't talk anymore.

It is perhaps in this regard that Allport's (1954) 'equal status' contact condition can be appreciated. The obvious issue is that we would be encouraging a world of exclusion that this narrative shows is already a problem. Interestingly, students primarily, participants cited personal growth, change in interest and lack of time as reasons why they lost contact with certain friends. Lack of time was a particularly large hindrance to friendship formation, either because students lost contact with existing friends or did not have the time to form new friendships.

### *Cross-group interaction and psychosocial labour<sup>2</sup>*

In order for students to become friends with people from different social groups, cross-group interaction is necessary. The narratives from the students seemed to be promising: many students expressed being open to interactions with people who were different to them and said there were opportunities on campus to do so. However, when asked about their personal cross-group interaction, it remained minimal. It appears therefore that there is an informal segregation that occurs on campus, findings which have also been made (see Alexander & Tredoux 2010; Zuma, 2013). Michelle's narrative gives an insight into this phenomenon: Michelle says that while lectures and tutorials are racially diverse, there is segregation within the lecture theatres according to racial categories. Michelle's narrative stated that there was interaction but it was only in an academic setting and that these interactions were insufficient to form friendships.

Michelle: When I look around my class, as Zinto said, like the people with the Tablets and everything, they all sit together and they usually are white and then the black students will sit together at the back of the classroom and then the coloured students sit in the middle of the classroom and I just look around and we are segregated like that, but we do still talk together and we share academic advice and on that level but...

Inga: What do you talk about – how do you talk about your common ground?

There were narratives which supported the idea that because of self-segregation in high school and the apparent race issue at UCT, people had this concept of how people of a particular racial category would behave and would therefore not wish to engage with people

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<sup>2</sup> The psychological and social aspects of all the effort and time invested in the initiation, development and maintenance of social relations (Zuma, 2013 p. 150).



from that racial category. Such racial prejudices have been found to be a hindrance to intergroup contact in previous studies (Finchilescu, Tredoux, Mynhardt, Pillay & Muianga, 2007). Zinto's narrative in particular strongly emphasised these feelings. Zinto believed that due to the negative assumptions that students had about people from other racial groups as legacy of apartheid, before any interaction had taken place and thus prevented cross-group interaction from occurring.

Zinto: UCT is kind of a very, very public platform we are kind of centre stage with all the pressure, 'we the best university and all that', so coming from outside and you come with a set of assumptions, 'oh there is this race issue at UCT', and like the bad ones. Really you have... I remember the school I went to. It was mainly black and coloured people, but they were divided sometimes because of that. 'Oh coloured people are like that' and coloured people were saying 'black people are like that', so you kind of have that mind set as well coming into varsity into like, 'do I want to really be friends with white people', and you have that. And as well with that [questioning cross-group friendship], you have that 'oh, our past and stuff, you guys.' That sort of thing comes into play as well. So you get people that are really open minded and like it's the new kind of age, new generation and all that, but you really get a significant number, I feel, of people that really come in with all those said assumptions and with that determines who gets into a group with who, that sort of thing.

Zinto's narrative illustrates the importance and difficulty of psychosocial labour which we can interpret here as the labour to psychologically and socially overcome our racist history that attaches itself to the present. It is clear from the narratives that our racist history for older generations which makes the labour of overcoming the history all the more important for young South Africans.

These seemingly contradicting narratives between ideal situations for intergroup contact and personal experiences regarding intergroup interaction and friendship pose serious questions. The narratives seemed to be indicate that students are willing have intergroup interactions as well as cross-group friendships. Yet, the narratives described friendships which were largely homogenous both in race and in class. Perhaps students simply find it too time consuming to engage with students that they find starkly different to them and while they are open to cross-group friendships they are not prepared to go out of their comfort

zones and initiate these friendships. A somewhat cynical view could be that students are merely saying that they are open to cross-group friendships because this is what they perceive to be the correct answer to give in such a research project. However, as several narratives did point out, even though cross-group friendships are in the minority, there are cross-group friendships, both personal to the students and from what the students have witnessed at the university. It would appear that when class is not at psychological and historical obstacles emerge to curtail cross-group friendships.

### **Space, class and friendship**

The spaces which students occupied were of importance both from a class perspective as well as from a friendship perspective. A prevalent observation that the spaces people occupy are important in friendship formation and maintenance. Many of the narratives said that their childhood and high school friends were a result of them staying in the same area as each other and they occupied the same space in a school setting. Spending time with people was cited as a necessary activity in order to form a friendship and many of the narratives concluded that it was natural to become friends with people that stayed in the same area as them. These findings are similar to those of Zuma (2013), who found that opportunity structures were required for cross-group interaction. Among these he names schools, academic programmes and residences. Since it is not uncommon for people who stay in the same area to be of a similar class, opportunity structures account for why many participants had childhood and high school friendships that were generally racially homogenous. Even in racially diverse schools racially homogenous friendships appeared to be the norm. The narratives which described cross-group friendships were in the minority. Elizabeth's narrative showed how she personally experienced being in a cross-group friendship in a school where in-group friendships were considered the norm:

Throughout high school my best friend was coloured and people, like the coloured girls used to like sing songs to us like 'ebony and ivory' and I'm like 'why you making such a big deal, come on guys' and it [friendship] was like divided like that...

Another interesting construction of space from the narratives was how certain assumptions were made regarding people's social class, based on the schools they attended. For example, Jess expressed how she would be reluctant to be friends with people from schools such as Bishop's because in her experience she found that people who went to such

schools based most of their conversation on money and materialistic possessions. Since Jess did not come from a wealthy background, she felt that she could not relate to them and therefore would not want to interact with them.

I mean my few Bishop's friends I've got into massive fights [with them] and I remember the one literally he was making fun of me because I went to Bergvliet so I said 'who cares' and he was like 'oh no literally my dad is so much better than yours' and I said 'why' 'oh, because bank account' and I was like '[sarcastically] okay that makes a lot of sense. It tells me a lot about you as well.' I don't want to know people like that.

The themes outlined above show how factors relating to class overlap with and influence and hinder student friendships. Structural opportunities for intergroup contact are complicated by class. Furthermore, the concept of psychosocial labour reveals the difficulty in forming cross-group friendships. Reading this together with South Africa's recent history it becomes clear that class is not only a complicated construct in reality and the lived experiences of students but that it works in complex ways with other psychological and social factors and processes.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this research show that class is an intricate social construct, which has many layers that influence and overlap one another. The predominant markers of class were money, material possessions, accent, language and space. The relationship between race and class remains a complex one and the most varied narratives emerged from discussion surrounding this relationship. It appears that the relationship that students experienced between the two is due to the history of South Africa, as well as emotional and lived experiences surrounding the meaning which is given to "race." The legacy of apartheid still has a large influence on students' observations pertaining to class as well as their own experience of class, particularly amongst the black and coloured students.

The findings in this study were congruent with past studies conducted at UCT regarding segregation and therefore it is conceivable that these experiences described by the participants are not unique to the participants of this research. Observations made by the participants surrounding segregation on campus were common. Even though the majority of narratives conveyed feelings of openness toward cross-group friendships, in reality very few

students had cross-group friendships. This study can partly be read as an attempt to understand cross-group friendship.

Narratives on space and its uses suggest that contact opportunity structures are needed for friendship formation to occur. However, the spaces which students occupied were often mediated by class and were homogenous both in race and in class. In the broader scheme of things, it appears that students often reproduce similar race and class relations emblematic of South African society when they enter the university. The methods for breaking down these structures and patterns of social relations remain unclear. Students who had gone to places frequented by people of a higher socioeconomic background than themselves found that they felt out of place or would simply outright refuse to go such places. Conversely, middle and upper class students would rarely go to places where people of a low socioeconomic background would go and if they did it would only be due to a friendship which had been formed outside of that particular space. Students also reported that they felt programmes such as orientation, which aim to encourage interaction, were experienced as forced and are therefore unsuccessful.

It appears that students do place a great amount of importance on how they perceive their self-concept in relation to others when forming friendships. It also appears that class is significantly important in forming personal identities amongst students, due to the many overlapping factors that influence a person's perceived social class. A great deal of importance is placed on perceived similarity when forming friendships and since class plays such a large role in students' self-concept. Taking together this thesis has illustrated the importance and influence of class in student friendships, specifically in intergroup relations broadly. In so doing we have also seen that class corresponds with historical, political, social and psychological factors and processes that shape our lived experience at the micro level of making and maintain friendships.

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## *Appendix A*

### **Informed Consent Form**

#### **UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

The role of class in friendship and intergroup relations: A qualitative study

#### **Introduction**

I am an Honours student at the University of Cape Town. I am conducting a study on how students' understanding of class influences friendship formation and I am inviting you to be a participant in the study. Participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any point in time. If there are any words or concepts that you do not understand, I will take the time to explain them.

#### **Procedure**

Should you decide to participate in this study, you will form part of a focus group in which you will discuss how your understanding of class influences your friendship groups and relations with people from different social groups. The focus group will be about an hour. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time with no penalty or any other consequences occurring.

#### **Risks**

This study poses no physical harm to you. You will also not be exposed to any questions that are psychologically stressful.

#### **Benefits**

You will receive three SRPP points for your participation in the study. This research also gives you an opportunity to offer your opinion on the role that class has in facilitating friendship.

**Confidentiality**

The focus group will take place in a safe, private room. Any information you divulge in the focus group will remain strictly confidential. You will remain anonymous throughout the research. You may ask for any information that you have shared to be removed from the study. An audio recording device will be used to record the focus group. You may request for the audio recording device to be turned off at any time. Access to the recordings will only be available to me and my supervisor.

**Results**

The findings in focus group will be presented in an academic research report.

**Contact Details**

If you have any questions, queries or complaints with regards to the study, you can contact Ernest Messina on 0736148851 or [ernestmessina@gmail.com](mailto:ernestmessina@gmail.com).

**Signature**

**I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study**

**Print Name of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Day/month/year**

*Appendix B*

**Demographic Information sheet**

Name:

Surname:

Gender:

Age:

Racial identification:

Student number:

Hometown:

High School:

Degree of study:

Course Code: