

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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## Racism on South Africa's beaches: then and now

As Durban prepares to host the World Conference on Racism, **Professor Kevin Durrheim** of the School of Psychology at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) and **Dr John Dixon** of the Department of Psychology at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom write about the racism linked to South Africa's beaches.

Although beach segregation was formally practised in South Africa throughout the last century, it was legislated by stricter policies of division under the apartheid system. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Amendment Act of 1960 empowered local authorities to implement beach segregation. Another piece of legislation, the Separate Amenities Amendment Bill of 1966, empowered any person in charge of 'public premises', which were defined so as to include the sea shore, to reserve such premises for racially exclusive usage. Finally, the Sea Shore Amendment Act of 1972 empowered the Minister of Agriculture to confer control of the beaches to local and provincial authorities. Although beach segregation was not uniformly implemented throughout the country, political pressure from central government, among other factors, ensured that by the early 1970s beach apartheid had become widely entrenched.

The organisation of the beaches of the KwaZulu-Natal coastline provides a stark example. Inscribed along this coastline was a tangibly racist logic, based around the apartheid principles of racial hierarchy and non-contact. Racial hierarchy was evident in the allocation of beaches. In the province of Natal, as it was then, 90% of the coastline, from the Tugela river mouth to Port Edward, "was either a white group area or a controlled area effectively controlled by whites," according to then MEC for local government Peter Miller in the *Mercury* in May 1988.

The situation in Durban was similar. In 1977 the council provided 650 metres of beach for blacks although they made up 46% of the population. Indians, who comprised 28% of the population, were allocated 550 metres. Three hundred metres were allocated to the coloureds, who made up 4% of the population and 2 100 metres were provided for whites who comprised 22% of the population. To compound this disparity, white beaches had better amenities, were more accessible and were closer to the city, whereas 'non-white' beaches outside municipal control were either ill-suited for recreational use or downright treacherous.

The idea of fencing beaches in urban areas was mooted on many occasions, but this was deemed 'impractical' and instead 'natural' barriers such as rock outcrops and breakwater piers were exploited. Among these 'natural' barriers were 'races' themselves. In Durban the apartheid principle of non-contact assumed starkly material form: whites were separated from Indians by coloureds, and Indians separated coloureds from blacks.

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Beaches became sites of peaceful struggle championed by the Mass Democratic Movement under the banner: 'All of God's beaches for all of God's people', particularly during the late 1980s, as the anti-apartheid struggle intensified. In contrast to whites' representations of beaches as recreational and care-free spaces, beaches were a site of political struggle for blacks. A defiance campaign targeted 'whites-only' beaches, with large crowds occupying the shore and black politicians wading famously in the forbidden seas. This kind of resistance to beach apartheid eventually brought change, which included the relaxing and later appealing of 'petty apartheid' legislation, including the segregation of public amenities such as parks, swimming pools and beaches. As South Africa progressed towards democratic government, the beaches were opened to all groups and the notorious 'whites-only' signs were removed. All beaches were desegregated in 1989.

Our attempts to identify broad lines of argument about relations on the province's beaches involved an analysis of over 400 newspaper clippings - including letters to the editor, editorials and reports - which appeared in a Durban newspaper between 1982 and 1995. Arguments about integration and segregation of the beaches were coded and categorised on the basis of their thematic content. Some arguments seemed to justify racial exclusion using specific constructions of place, while another group constructed black beachgoers as an alien presence on white beaches and, more specifically, as a threat to the integrity of beaches which were viewed as being the preserve of the (white) family.

The race war for South African beaches in the 1980s was a battle for space that was fought mostly non-violently through representations. When crowds of (multiracial) protesters occupied Blouberg beach in the Cape in 1989, for instances, their defiance did not look like protest. It took the form of a family outing, where appropriate beach behaviour - building castles, playing games and having picnics - was the order of the day. What made this unusual was that multiracial families had occupied a white beach - a protest that drew military action from the police

The newspaper clippings included many instances where the beach was portrayed as the exclusive domain of the family. References to "up country visitors", for example, referred to white, middle class holiday makers who traditionally spent their family vacations on the Natal coast. In terms of this tradition, the beach is a domain where peaceful families gather to have fun. They are described as "happy family groups" who gather to enjoy "a day in the sea and sun". As family spaces, beaches are also racialised spaces. It is blacks who are seen as the problem. In many extracts, 'black' is used interchangeably to refer to black Africans and to the 'non-white' people of apartheid: coloureds, blacks, Indians and Asians. In some extracts, black beach-goers are branded transgressive either because they display inappropriate conduct or because they drive away white and Indian families. Extracts often seek to establish a contrast between peaceful families whose presence on beaches is fitting and racialised intruders who are out of place.

For example, D. Rose wrote in a letter to the editor, published in the *Mercury* in January 1988: "Durban must hang its head in shame. We invite up-country visitors to enjoy the festive season on our fair beaches and then subject them to the awful experience of being dominated and intimidated by hordes of largely undisciplined black people...Looking back a few years, one asks what has happened to the happy family groups that one used to see on our beaches. One certainly does not see such groups of white people on our multiracial beaches.

In a number of extracts, blacks are referred to as 'others' and black behaviour is depicted as out of place. Geopolitical metaphors are applied to black behaviour. Examples from extracts include blacks "dispossessed" whites, "created a hostile atmosphere when they had started chanting ANC songs", "commandeered" the beaches and "occupied" the parking area in a "well organised political demonstration". These revolutionary activities during the 1980s were associated with

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ideologies of 'the total onslaught' and 'the swart gevaar' (the black peril), and were precisely the kinds of threats which whites encountered day-to-day in their public lives. On the beaches, however, such conduct was misplaced. The summer vacation is, after all, a time of refuge from public politics.

The construction of beaches as family places was used in arguments both in favour of and against segregation to portray beaches as private places that should be free of the politics of public life.

In the new South Africa, the beaches have remained essentially contested and exclusive spaces. Although a degree of integration now exists, it is not uncommon to find beaches previously defined as black, white, Indian and coloured still occupied predominantly by people who were so categorised by apartheid.

The reasoning of the new racism presupposes and mobilises deep-seated assumptions to make racism appear natural. Desmond Morris, writing in 1971, argued that one of the similarities displayed by people was the formation of district groups who felt "somehow different, really deep-down different, from members of other groups".

This is the essence of what we wished to investigate in analysing the transcriptions of 22 open-ended interviews with middle class white South African families (English and Afrikaans speaking) who were vacationing at the coastal holiday village of Scottburgh between December 25, 1998 and January 3, 1999. All interviews took place on the beach and were conducted in an informal manner between an interviewer (Durrheim who was dressed in beachwear) and sunbathing families. The interviews began with a discussion of family holidays and gradually moved to the topic of beach segregation. A non-threatening and relaxed conversation rapport developed during the interviews and there were many instances where the interviewer was referred to in colloquial terms, such as 'boet' (Afrikaans for 'brother' or 'my man') indicating informality and fraternity.

The aim of the interviews was to generate accounts of segregation. Although the beaches in South Africa were officially desegregated in 1989, they have remained informally segregated, and it is not uncommon to find beaches populated almost entirely by whites. Our interest was in both personal accounts of why individuals and families chose to holiday at a predominantly white beach and accounts of why white South Africans perpetuate the racist traditions of the past by holidaying together in 'white places'.

The interview schedule included no questions about culture, but all interviewees spoke about race in terms of culture, and explicit and implicit references to anthropological universals were common

**According to Mike:**

Ja, you, you're probably speaking to the wrong kind of guy because I'm very much, uhm, a racist hey, uhm. I don't believe cultures can mix, hey. I don't believe that they - cultures - can mix successfully. Uhm, I've been in the Navy myself where we were forced to stay with different cultures and it doesn't work. Uhm, the first two or three months everybody tries to make it work. Everybody does. But you just cannot. Uhm, because, like I say, I just don't believe cultures can mix for various reasons...there's no ways you can have segregation. I mean, in this country, you know, but I believe there's gonna be tension. I believe there's gonna be problems, uhm, and today is a good example. Okay, it it's mainly white and everybody will stay together, uhm. If the beach does start going black then the whites will, will go somewhere else where most of the whites hang around. People naturally stick to their own culture, that's just the way it is and everybody will probably try and deny it and say 'No, I've got no problem with that', but, I mean, that's the truth hey. That's the truth.

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throughout the interviews. Participants expressed racial difference through contrasts between the developed and undeveloped, civilised and uncivilised, traditional and modern and African and non-African.

**According to Fred:**

I think, if you look at it just from a general perspective. There's a natural, if you want to call it, segregation. And I'm talking about race. You look the world over, I mean, I've lived in the UK. I've gone to many places in the world, the US and all over, and you find there's a natural segregation. Whether it be by race, by religion, by culture, by, it's not imposed upon you. I mean, why do you have Portuguese Clubs, Italian Clubs and, er, what have you, because they are familiar with their cultures...You know, you even look at schools, now the schooling's open and everything like that, you still tend to find the Indian kids will stick together, the African kids will stick together, the Portuguese kids. If you got three Portuguese people in the same class, in grade one, hell, I can almost put my head on a block that those three kids will make friends with each other because they have a cultural bond. Uhm, and they don't have to know each other from Adam, but there's that cultural bond, and you, familiarity, the minute you've got familiarity with somebody that knows your customs and culture...

How you go about trying to, let's say, integrate people to have more contact with one another, you know I think it's a very difficult scenario. Obviously you've got to try and do it by leisure activities, by sport, uhm, but you've got to do it in such a way where people are going to be very comfortable to do it. Uhm you know, I think even if you look at the races, there are some people that are uhm, I sincerely believe very uhm, what's the word? False. You know, 'hell, this is my black brother'. In the mean time he's got absolutely, no, he's not worried what happens to that fellow uhm, but it's, it's, the problem is the political correctness. You're getting this political correctness now that, I mean, you've even seen the situation where there's some white families adopting black kids and that, and I say this and I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but believe me I don't think it's right or, or, or, I think it's very difficult for both families.

As an example, the argument employed by participants Mike and Fred proceeds by the following chain of reasoning: First, that segregation is the natural outcome of the operation of the forces, processes and laws of human nature. This being the case, any form of social change toward an integrated society is forced, against nature, and likely to have adverse outcomes.

Mike presents the argument as a simple fact of life: "People naturally stick to their own culture, that's just the way it is." Similarly, Fred defines segregation as a natural process that is "not imposed on you". A distinction is thus drawn between the natural and unnatural, as segregation is contrasted with a set of social relations that are 'forced'. The agents of social change who are 'forcing nature' are portrayed either as irrational ('politically correct' or 'false') individuals, or as powerful authorities (governments, sports administrators, employers) who, in the interest of the power of bureaucracy, act blindly or irrationally against the processes of nature to force integration.

As Mike and Fred's argument develops, the naturalness of segregation is not a dogmatic claim, but a reasoned conclusion based on theory and observation. Fred provides a theory of cultural bonding to explain why segregation is natural. The reason why you have "Portuguese Clubs, Italian Clubs and what have you" is cultural familiarity. And the reason why school children segregate is that they are initially attracted to each other by familiarity, go on to "make friends with each other because they have a cultural bond" and then feel familiar "with somebody that knows (their) customs and cultures".

In developing their arguments, speakers such as Fred and Mike often demonstrate that the causes of segregation are universal. Natural segregation stems from processes that apply not only to

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'race relations' in South Africa. If segregation always occurs everywhere, it must be natural. If segregation is universal then there must be some basic feature of human nature responsible rather than, say, personal racism or the racist organisation of a particular society.

Speakers also use strategic lines of reasoning developed around a 'logic' of identifying and eliminating alternative assumptions. For example, by claiming that integration failed in the Navy where people were committed to its success and "everybody tries to make it work", Mike eliminates the possibility that the failure might have been due to a lack of commitment.

Fred mentions that rugby is the sport of the Afrikaner because he "gets born with a rugby ball" and later has rugby "drummed into his head". In this regard, segregation in sport is due simply to the familiarity one develops with a particular sport through cultural socialisation and has nothing to do with apartheid, masculinity and capitalism. Fred translates socialisation into a natural ability, which re-inscribes difference and segregation in sport. Similarly, another participant argues that beach segregation has nothing to do with racism, but arises naturally as descendants of European colonists become scared of racial contact. Arguments about culture allow speakers to downplay or ignore the recent and longer political history of South Africa, while they transform segregation into an a-moral and a-political natural inevitability. Fred argues that he does not think that it is right for white families to adopt black kids. He explains that he is not morally opposed to integration - "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that" - but that nature is against integration, making it "very difficult for both families". However, if integration is natural, then it cannot be bad.

In addition to defending racism, speakers use arguments about natural cultural segregation to attack anti-racist social policies, practices and agents as unnaturally forcing social change. Whereas segregation is natural, agents such as the government, companies and politically correct "false" individuals have a hand in forcing integration. Their work is doomed to failure because it strives to "try and make people do things that they actually don't naturally do".

Regarding transformation, a number of interviewees recognised that change must happen - "there's no ways you can have segregation in this country" - but argued that desegregation should follow a natural course, over generations, if it was to avoid forcing people, making them uncomfortable and scared. Fred acknowledges that some form of social intervention is desirable to "assist the process", but that this should be restricted to the "odd little situation". Leisure contexts, which are peripheral politically and commercially, are deemed most appropriate since they are least likely to make people feel uncomfortable.

Arguments that employ theories of cultural processes to depict segregation as a universal, natural phenomenon, or a simple fact of life, are used to justify racial segregation. Such reasoning takes place as people debate the issues of the day, as they argue among themselves, read or listen to the arguments of others, discuss their experiences with friends and acquaintances, and reflect silently to themselves about their actions, choices and decisions.

Our analysis of the language used by white South Africans has drawn attention to several features of the use of 'culture' in racist discourse. In particular, it has shown how racism may be constructed as rational. In our interviews there were a number of occasions where respondents identified themselves as racists. They did this, despite the strong sanctions against racism, by constructing racism as a natural inevitability and hence rational.

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