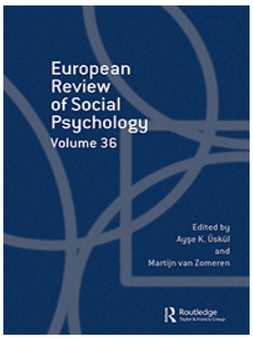

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'Crossing the line': A boundary transgression model of resistance to desegregation

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ABSTRACT

Informal patterns of spatial division often persist in historically divided societies where segregation has been officially dismantled. This paper presents a theoretical model to explain why, focusing on the desegregation–resegregation dynamic. The Boundary Transgression Model highlights two interconnected pathways - social psychological and human geographic - that shape intergroup relations under conditions of change, fostering the re-emergence of distance, division, and contact avoidance. It frames resistance to desegregation as a response to constructions of boundary transgression, "ruptures" to the socio-spatial order. The argument is developed through a 25-year research programme in post-apartheid South Africa and post-accord Northern Ireland. The paper also proposes an expanded integration strategy, complementing the prejudice reduction model of change in social psychology. This aims to transform not only person–person but also person–place relations, bringing social psychologists into dialogue with environmental psychology, geography, and urban sociology, and with practitioners in urban design, public policy, and architecture.

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KEYWORDS Segregation; desegregation; contact avoidance; prejudice; place identity

> Threatening to transgress or pollute the spatial order necessitates its reinvention, first by conceptualising the order anew and then by reproducing spatial confinement and separation in these modernized terms. (Goldberg, 1993, p. 46)

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A curious wall runs beneath Belfast Cemetery, six inches below the surface and 2 ft wide by 9 ft tall – roughly the depth of a well dug grave. Installed on the instruction of Bishop Patrick Dorrian in 1869, it was intended to divide Catholic from Protestant burial sites, consecrated from unholy ground, preventing members of the two communities from mixing even in the afterlife (Ruffell & Rocke, 2023). Local tour guides dub it Northern Ireland's "first peace wall", and a section was recently excavated for public viewing. The wall might seem at first glance to be an anachronism, a poignant reminder of Belfast's past and the dark days of the conflict. The problem with this interpretation – as those same tour guides make clear to visitors – is that peace walls still visibly crisscross the city, forming metal and concrete barriers that continue to divide its communities. They have multiplied in number since Northern Ireland's conflict was officially ended by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Jarman, 2012). Despite numerous government initiatives, residential segregation remains widespread, especially in working-class enclaves. Over 90% of Northern Irish children still attend same-faith schools and intermarriage rates are around 10% (McAloney, 2014). In short, while sectarian violence has died down, sectarianism is alive and well (Taylor, 2024).

A similar story can be told of South Africa's transition to democracy. The notorious laws of apartheid – the word's literal meaning is "apartness" - were repealed in a remarkable period between the early 1980s and mid-1990s. The Group Areas Act of 1951, the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953, the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, and the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act of 1951 - are all gone. Many other positive changes have happened, yet segregation endures (Figure 1). The spaces that apartheid laws once formally policed remain informally divided across multiple domains and scales (e.g., Parry & van Eeden, 2015). Most Black South Africans continue to live in impoverished, peri-urban settlements that few Whites enter much less cohabit. South Africans rarely marry outside their own communities. The Immorality Act, which forbade intimate relations across race groups, is long abolished, but the probability of a Black person falling in love with or marrying a White partner remains comparatively remote (Telles et al., 2023). Moreover, national surveys – reflecting enduring structural as well as social divisions – find that most black South Africans (63%) have limited or no interaction with members of other groups, even if there is a slow upwards trend (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2023).

These examples introduce the central problem of our paper: even in ostensibly transformed societies like post-accord Northern Ireland and post-apartheid South Africa, informal patterns of segregation persist, evolving in ways that continue to limit contact between groups and maintain inequality. It is a problem that defies simple solutions, for

Figure 1. Residential segregation in greater Cape Town, South Africa. Note: The township of Masiphumelele (left) is populated mainly by Black African residents. Lake Michelle, a wealthy gated community (right), is populated mainly by White residents. The areas are divided by security walls and a "buffer zone". Photograph by Johnny Miller.

segregation is shaped by multiple factors across multiple levels of analysis. Its explanation has spawned a vast literature based, among other disciplines, in history, geography, economics, demography, political science, and urban sociology (e.g., Carlson et al., 2025; Hwang & McDaniel, 2022; D. S. Massey & Denton, 1993; Netto et al., 2024; Nightingale, 2012). We must accordingly begin with a concession: a social psychological account of the persistence of segregation can only ever solve one part of the puzzle. Yet we believe it to be an important part. Indeed, the role of so-called "subjective factors" has long been acknowledged by researchers working in other fields, who have argued, for example, that individual and group "preferences" complexly shape residential segregation, even when controlling for economic differences, institutional discrimination, and other predictors (e.g., W. A. V. Clark & Fossett, 2008; Dawkins, 2004; Krysan & Crowder, 2017; Piekut, 2021; Quillian, 2002).

Ironically, the psychological roots of persistent segregation have been neglected by psychologists themselves. Seeking to understand when and why intergroup contact and desegregation can reduce prejudice, they have disregarded an inconvenient truth (J. Dixon et al., 2005): segregation remains

the norm in many supposedly integrated societies. Contact, however beneficial, occurs less frequently than we might presume or hope. Addressing this gap, our paper proposes a dual process model of resistance to desegregation, treating it as a response to constructions of "boundary transgression" (Sibley, 1995).

The Boundary Transgression Model (BTM) highlights two pathways that shape intergroup relations under conditions of social change, a psychological pathway and a human geographic pathway. We suggest that these pathways are interrelated and help to explain the persistence of segregation, its cyclical nature, and its adaptations into new forms. We argue that the geographic pathway – and related dynamics of place-identification and boundary defence – has been comparatively neglected by social psychologists, opening up an opportunity for integrative work with companion disciplines such as environmental psychology and human geography. We develop this argument by drawing evidence from a 25-year research programme conducted by the authors in post-apartheid South Africa and, more recently, post-accord Northern Ireland. We also discuss implications for social change, limitations, and avenues for future work.

The contact hypothesis and the enduring problem of segregation

Two of us are White South Africans (Tredoux, Durrheim) who lived through and beyond apartheid; three come from Northern Ireland (Dixon, Stevenson, McKeown), representing both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. Huck, the geographer in a team of psychologists, grew up in Burnley in the North-West of England, a town known for stark divisions between White and Asian communities. These experiences have shaped – and inevitably constrained – our understanding of segregation, both as an academic concern and a lived reality that sustains division and inequality. On the one hand, they have heightened our sensitivity to the complex interplay of psychological, spatial, and historical factors in maintaining segregation, reinforced our commitment to interdisciplinary research, and deepened our engagement with marginalised communities. On the other hand, we acknowledge that as an all-white authorship team, our perspectives on segregation and desegregation are shaped by our racial positionalities, which may limit our ability to fully capture the lived experiences of communities often most affected by these processes.

From the outset, our work aimed not only to analyse (de)segregation, but also to promote social change, taking bearings from a tradition of applied research rooted in the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). This tradition emerged in the 1940s as an evidence-based challenge to race segregation in the United States. At a time when Jim Crow laws upheld a "separate but equal" ideology in the Southern states – and de facto

segregation prevailed elsewhere – psychologists assembled evidence that desegregation could foster racial harmony. They studied already transforming contexts – public housing (Wilner et al., 1952), wartime platoons (Star et al., 1949/1958), the Merchant Navy (Brophy, 1946), and industry (Minard, 1952) – and found evidence contradicting segregationist assumptions (K. B. Clark, 1953). Far from intensifying racial conflict, desegregation encouraged new forms of interaction that seemed, in turn, both to reduce prejudice and increase support for further integration.

The contact hypothesis soon inspired a wave of international research, generating evidence across diverse settings and intergroup contexts (for reviews see Paluck et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2013). By the beginning of the new century, Hewstone et al. (2006) could confidently proclaim the hypothesis had " . . . contributed greatly to the fact that psychology is now in its best position ever to make a contribution to the advancement of world peace by actively promoting intergroup tolerance" (p.100).

In historically divided societies like Northern Ireland and South Africa, this tradition of work has proved influential. Local research suggests that contact can improve intergroup attitudes even amid entrenched conflict and inequality, promoting reconciliation, trust, forgiveness, and support for peace (e.g., Bradnum et al., 1993; Gibson, 2004; Hewstone et al., 2006; Holtman et al., 2005; Luiz & Krige, 1981; McKeown & Psaltis, 2017; Merilees et al., 2017; Paolini et al., 2004; Schmid et al., 2008; Swart et al., 2011; Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2010; Van Assche et al., 2023). It is especially effective under conditions of equal status that afford participants opportunities for cooperation, friendship, and self-disclosure. However, local researchers have also criticised contact research for prioritising the study of idealised interactions in contexts where uncomfortable issues of division and inequality are minimised (J. Dixon et al., 2005; Durrheim et al., 2014; Foster & Finchilescu, 1986; McKeown & Dixon, 2017). This arguably neglects the suboptimal realities of ordinary life in historically divided societies, where interactions may remain superficial, hierarchical or instrumental – that is if they occur at all . . .

In the wider social science literature, the persistence of segregation has emerged as a recurring theme, particularly in research on residential demography (Hwang & McDaniel, 2022; D. S. Massey & Denton, 1993; Netto et al., 2024). More than 30 years after legal segregation ended, D. S. Massey and Denton (1989) coined the term "hypersegregation" to capture how U.S. cities remained divided across multiple dimensions. Goldberg (1998) similarly wrote of the "new segregation" - a configuration produced not by government laws and official policies, but by fragmented, informal, class-differentiated, and complexly (re)institutionalised systems of "racialised reshuffling" (Hwang & McDaniel, 2022). The consequences of this process

have been starkly documented. Research shows African Americans and other minorities often remain confined to impoverished, sometimes harmful, environments with poor educational, employment, and health outcomes (Faber & Drummond, 2024; D. S. Massey & Fishcer, 2000; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Sharkey, 2009).

Recently, this work has extended beyond residential demography. Researchers increasingly explore how segregation may be reproduced through individuals' use of everyday "activity spaces" (Liao et al., 2025). A striking example isNilforoshan et al. (2023) study, which used mobile phone co-presence data from 9.6 million Americans to analyse 1.6 billion real-world encounters across 382 metropolitan areas. They found contact exposure between wealthier and poorer groups was lowest in more exclusive spaces (e.g., golf clubs) and highest in "bridging" zones located between areas of different socioeconomic status (e.g., shopping plazas). Paradoxically, exposure was also lowest in places popularly associated with cosmopolitanism – large cities. With a greater range of venues from which to choose, it seems, residents eschew those inhabited by members of a different socioeconomic group.

Our work has been shaped by this broader social science literature on the persistence of segregation. In both South Africa and Northern Ireland, we repeatedly documented informal practices of division, even in contexts where legal barriers had been removed and integration initiatives implemented. Across neighbourhoods, schools, leisure facilities, bars and nightclubs, and public spaces, we found intergroup interactions were superficial, infrequent, fleeting, or "illusory" (cf (Maoz, 2002). while segregation seemed to flourish in new forms. With some exceptions (e.g (Schofield & Sagar, 1977),), we felt the contact literature under-specified this problem.

Our early work on relations in rapidly diversifying South African universities, for example, documented evolving patterns of racial isolation. L. Schrieff et al. (2005, 2010) found that students of different race groups were essentially "eating together apart" in a dining hall at the University of Cape Town (i.e., sitting at different tables and favouring different sections of the hall), a pattern that remained stable over time. Using a time lapse photography method, Tredoux et al. (2005) analysed relations in a public seating area, adapting segregation indices (D and P[1]) to explore the patterning of occupation of different sections (Figure 2). Molecular analysis of entry and departure patterns suggested that students were choosing to congregate with same race neighbours. Koen and Durrheim (2009) mapped seating in

[1]The D statistic measures how *evenly* two groups are distributed across spatial units and is the most widely used estimate of segregation. The P statistic measures the degree of intergroup *exposure* group members have to one another, based on calculating the weighted likelihood that members of one group share spatial units with members of another group. Exposure measures are arguably of particular significance to the study of intergroup contact, though not widely used by psychologists

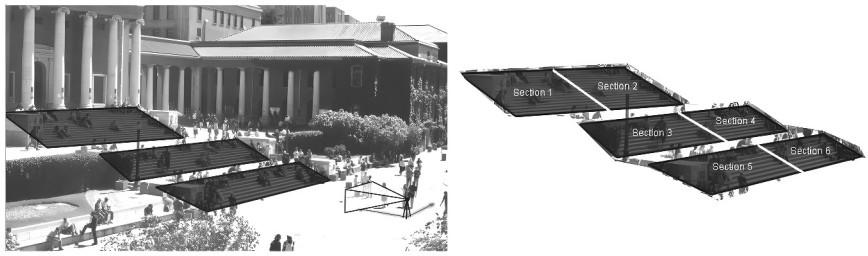

Figure 2. The observational setup used in Tredoux et al. (2005), which showed informal seating segregation on public steps that persisted over a two-year period.

lecture theatres at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Applying Campbell et al. (1966) Adjacency Index, they identified persistent racial segregation, which was higher in lower density lectures and increased over time. McKeown and colleagues later mapped similar patterns in Northern Ireland. Their work demonstrated how ethno-religious segregation was re-emerging in integrated secondary schools, cross-community groups, and during the transition to university – all contexts that afford meaningful opportunities for young people to encounter the "other" community (McKeown et al., 2012, 2015; Orr et al., 2012).

Numerous studies have since confirmed that even intimately co-located groups tend to maintain interactional distances and boundaries. Bettencourt et al. (2019) produced a systematic review of such work and further studies have emerged since its publication (e.g (Bracegirdle et al., 2023; Paajanen et al., 2022; Pettersson et al., 2024). "Micro-ecologies of segregation" have been richly documented in settings such as public transport, cafes, school cafeterias, beaches, malls, bars, playgrounds, and parks.

Why is segregation so persistent?

Explaining the persistence of segregation is notoriously difficult. It is a classically overdetermined phenomenon: multiply caused, multiply sustained, multiply expressed. Explanations typically point to a web of factors – housing policy, institutional practices, historical and ecological constraints, and, most obviously, economic inequalities. Even accounting for these structural and macro-level drivers, segregation clearly also has a psychological dimension, which is widely acknowledged in other disciplines (e.g., W. A. V. Clark, 1991; Dawkins, 2004; Krysan & Crowder, 2017; Piekut, 2021; Quillian, 2002).

Urban sociologists and geographers have drawn extensively on psychological factors to understand segregation, incorporating elements of the theoretical model we present below. Some, for example, have focused on the

simple human desire to live among similar others (W. A. V. Clark, 1991; W. A. V. Clark & Fossett, 2008). Schelling's (1978) well-known simulations showed that even mild personal preferences for ingroup neighbours can lead to extreme, perhaps unintended, levels of collective segregation, generating an extensive literature on associated boundary conditions (Ubarevičienė et al., 2024). Moreover, while preferentially segregated settings tend to be stable and self-reinforcing, mixed settings appear highly sensitive to change. Agent-Based Models suggest even small shifts in racial composition may lead to tipping points and "invasion-succession" (Wolf, 1957) sequences. In this research tradition, then, integration is the anomaly, the marked case, segregation the equilibrium state (W. A. V. Clark & Fossett, 2008; Fossett, 2011; Ubarevičienė et al., 2024).

Others have argued, however, its emphasis on preference and homophily sanitises a darker truth. White Americans frequently hold affective biases against Black neighbours (Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Farley et al., 1994; Krysan et al., 2009), their mere presence being viewed as a proxy of neighbourhood stigma and decline (Krysan & Crowder, 2017). In this view, segregation is not just about ingroup preference – it is also about outgroup stereotyping, prejudice, and avoidance. White residents act to block entry of Black people into their neighbourhoods, resist integration efforts, or engage in "white flight" (Wurdock, 1981)[2] . They avoid moving to diverse neighbourhoods, using racialised heuristics to inform their search for a new home (Krysan & Crowder, 2017; Quillian, 2002). Importantly, such attitudes are not confined to private citizens. They also underpin institutional practices of discrimination – biased mortgage appraisals, real estate steering, landlord decisions, and other varieties of what Hwang and McDaniel (2022) call "hierarchy endurance." Benign preferences may play a role, but they coexist with personal and structural patterns of discrimination that are anything but benign.[3]

While contact researchers have long acknowledged that homophily and prejudice can drive resistance to desegregation, these dynamics have seldom been treated as sustained objects of inquiry. Recently, however, the focus has shifted: the processes underpinning contact seeking and avoidance have moved to the centre of research agendas.

[2]This process was vividly captured by McDermott & Clark (1955 cited in Wolf, 1957, p. 7): "The abiding problem in the city is not violence, but the frigid withdrawal of Whites from the presence of Negro neighbours. Time and again rashes of 'For Sale' signs have appeared along whole blocks of homes. Within a year, it will be a foregone conclusion that the block will soon be all Negro."

[3]Zubrinksy & Bobo (1996, p.371–372) are passionate on the matter: " … it is not merely empirically untenable to assert that simple economics or a morally innocent mutual ethnocentrism are major components of the process of racial residential segregation: these are egregiously mistaken analyses given our results and those of recent studies … Race matters. And it matters not merely because members of any group prefer 'their own kind', but because everyone is aware of and must adapt to the historically developed, structurally rooted, and psychologically unavoidable American racial order or hierarchy."

Increasingly, they are framed as outcomes in need of explanation (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2019; Kauff et al., 2021; Paolini et al., 2018) and the range of predictors under scrutiny has expanded accordingly. Alongside well-established social psychological variables such as prejudice and perceived threat (e.g., Schlüter et al., 2018), researchers are now probing a broader array of influences: social norms and institutional support (Ditlmann & Turkoglu, 2025), political and media discourse (Ron et al., 2017; Shayegh & Choma, 2025), meta-perceptions (Ramiah et al., 2014), pluralistic ignorance (Shelton & Richeson, 2005), negative contact (Meleady & Forder, 2019), intergroup anxiety (Anicich et al., 2021), trust (McKeown & Psaltis, 2017), intragroup support (Stevenson & Sagherian-Dickey, 2016), and confidence in contact (Stevenson et al., 2020). Dispositional factors such as curiosity, openness, and poly-culturalism are also gaining empirical attention (Antonoplis & John, 2022; Paolini et al., 2018; R. N. Turner et al., 2020).

Some of this emerging work has informed the development of our own research, as has the wider social science literature discussed in this section. As elaborated below, our research is also indebted to geographic and environmental psychological perspectives. Notably, we have drawn heavily on the early work of geographers David Sibley (1992, 1995) and Tim Cresswell (1996) on the "sin" of boundary transgression, as well as on psychological work on place identity dynamics (H. M. Proshansky, 1978), particularly its extension to intergroup relations (e.g., Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2016). In the next section, we draw these varying strands together in a Boundary Transgression Model (BTM) that clarifies the pathways through which resistance to desegregation emerges, feeding into ongoing cycles of segregation.

"Crossing the line": A boundary transgression model of resistance to desegregation

Our objectives in presenting the BTM are twofold. First, we want to explain how and why resistance to desegregation unfolds, presenting a conceptual framework that unifies factors often treated piecemeal. We prioritise parsimony over comprehensiveness and focus specifically on relations in historically divided societies under conditions of social change. We refer the reader to Ron et al. (2017), Paolini et al. (2018), and Kauff et al. (2021) for wider-ranging discussions of the potential antecedents of interactions across group lines. Second, we want to address a blind spot in mainstream psychological perspectives, which concerns its neglect of the human geographic dimensions of resistance to desegregation. To introduce this theme, and before

turning to the model, we outline the case study that founded our research programme.

An opening case study: Hout Bay

In the late 1980s, as the apartheid regime entered its final years, state authorities sometimes eased restrictions on the informal settlement of Black South Africans in or near White residential areas, enabling the limited emergence of pockets of residential desegregation (Saff, 1994). An example was the establishment of Imizamo Yethu in 1991, a settlement located in the coastal town of Hout Bay approximately 20 km from Cape Town. This development conferred historic land rights on a community of around 2,000 predominantly Black residents. The reaction from the area's established White inhabitants was swift and largely antagonistic.

Drawing on analysis of local media reports, field interviews, and archival material, we traced the nature of this resistance (J. A. Dixon & Reicher, 1997; J. A. Dixon et al., 1994, 1997). Initial opposition took the form of classic NIMBYism: residents demanded the settlement be removed entirely and its population relocated elsewhere. Newspaper narratives mobilised the discourse of racialised threat, portraying new arrivals as criminal, disorderly, even carriers of disease; and a campaign of letters to the press described a town at risk of being "swamped" by "squatters", claiming that property values were in freefall.

The settlement was also framed as a symbolic violation – "out of place" in a town famed for its scenic beauty, ecological sensitivity, and tourism ("The jewel in the crown of Sir Francis Drake's Fairest Cape in all the world", as tourist brochures remind visitors). Opponents portrayed it as a "blot on the landscape" (J. A. Dixon et al., 1997) that eroded residents' sense of place and belonging. This representation resonated with local symbols circulating at the time – bumper stickers declaring a "Republic of Hout Bay" accompanied by mock passports that asserted an exclusive place-based identity.

As it became clear that Imizamo Yethu would not be removed, resistance evolved. The newly formed Hout Bay Property Rights Association and other interest groups shifted their focus to containment: limiting the size and density of the settlement and shaping the architecture of its boundary with the adjacent White neighbourhoods of Hughenden and Penzance (Figure 3). These efforts were not merely logistical. They expressed deeper struggles over space, identity and the regulation of (unwanted) contact. Key features of the resulting spatial configuration included:

- **Peripheral siting**: Imizamo Yethu was placed in a disused forestry station on the town's outskirts, creating separation from the commercial centre.

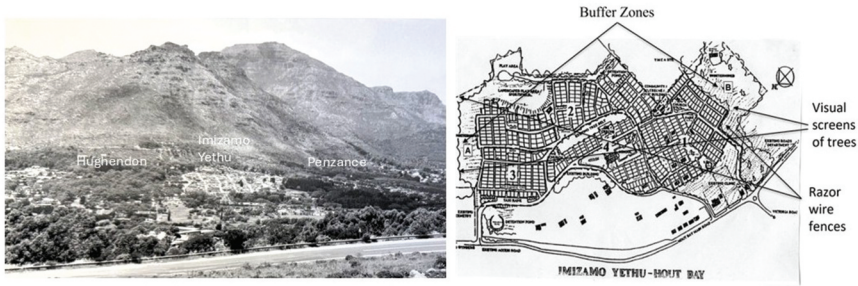

Figure 3. Location and spatial design of Imizamo Yethu. Note: The photograph on the left was taken by the first author in 1996; the architects' plans on the right were published in a local newspaper, The Sentinel News, in 1993. We have added arrows indicating the approximate positioning of the buffer zones (A & B), tree screens, and perimeter fencing.

- **Buffer zones**: Empty tracts of land were left undeveloped to act as spatial separators between Imizamo Yethu and surrounding communities.
- **Physical barriers**: Perimeter fencing made with razor wire demarcated the settlement.
- **Lack of infrastructure**: The settlement was serviced by a one-way-in, one-way-out road system. No tertiary roads were built to connect it to neighbouring areas.
- **Visual screening**: Trees were strategically preserved to obscure Imizamo Yethu from view of surrounding neighbourhoods, reinforcing a "sensuous geography" (Rodaway, 1994) of division.
- **Contrasting design**: The grid of small "site-and-service" plots contrasted with the landscaped affluence of nearby estates, an architectural incongruity again accentuating perceptions of the settlement as "out of place".

Together, these new spatial arrangements (see Figure 3) enacted *both* inclusion and exclusion, desegregation *and* resegregation. Although extending rights of residence and property ownership to an area reserved for Whites under apartheid, they also recapitulated segregation in a new material and symbolic form. In so doing, they facilitated a new cycle of avoidance, rendering contacts between White residents and their new neighbours infrequent and boundary-threatening. As one resident explained in an interview exchange (J. A. Dixon & Reicher, 1997, p. 372):

P: . . . it's quite strange now the guys just come to the door

Int: Ya

P: The Black guy. It's only the second time in a year and a half that that's happened here so

Int: Really?

P: Hmm, so it's not as bad as I envisaged as long as it stays this way. I hate the thought of them coming over the buffer zone, you know that 90 metres that they're supposed to stay away. And I've heard that there is a chance once you know with the new government that there won't be any buffer zone, maybe no fence. They'll just come and go as they please and that worries me because this would be the ideal

Int: Through road

P: Yeh, it's a short cut for them and would be really upsetting

The boundary transgression model

The BTM (Figure 4) proceeds from a simple premise: desegregation entails the transgression of both material and symbolic boundaries – a "crossing of the line" as members of historically separated groups are brought into new relations of proximity and intimacy. This may occur when "they" enter "our" space or when "we" enter "theirs", and it may create forms of rupture that unfold across diverse settings and scales. Consider, for example, the U.S. "freedom riders," who defied racially segregated bus seating; the neighbourhood-level transitions in places like Hout Bay; or the border crossings of migrants entering foreign territories. Further, attributions of boundary transgression may emerge in response to both formal, state-led desegregation

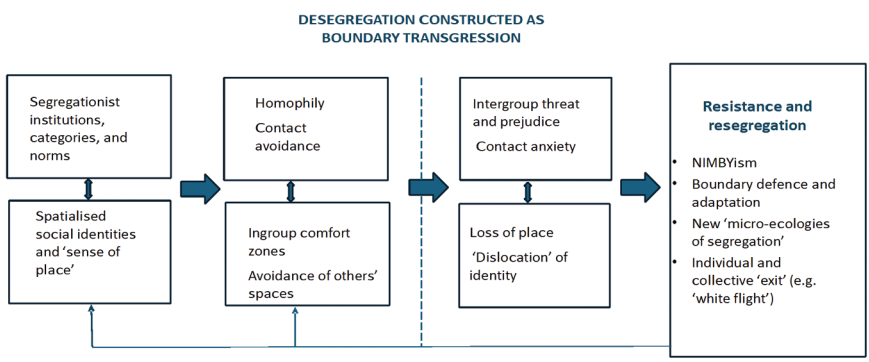

Figure 4. Crossing the line: a boundary transgression model of resistance to desegregation.

programs and more organic, informal or incremental changes in neighbourhood composition. In either case, we conceptualise them not simply as responses to policy processes or demographic trends, but also as discursive, experiential and affective *disruptions* of symbolic, social, and territorial boundaries (Figure 4). Crucially, such disruptions do not implicate purely individual level reactions to the emergence of new demographic patterns or relations of physical proximity. Rather, they are collectively constructed and shared representations of changes in "our" socio-spatial relations with "them". Thus, for example, elite discourse often plays a central role in defining which spaces are deemed sacrosanct, which ingresses are construed as violations, and which groups are positioned as intruders (cf., Dixon et al., 2000; Hopkins, 2010; Alrababah et al., 2024).

The BTM builds on the foundational insight that segregation is simultaneously psychological and spatial. Through what Sibley (1992) terms the "strong classification" of space, it creates environments where the salience of particular social categories – both chronically and situationally – is heightened. Consider, for instance, the consequences for category "readiness" (knowledge-based accessibility), "fit" (ability of a category to capture reality), and "accentuation" (motivated differentiation between categories) (McGarty, 1999) of travelling daily on a bus where Black commuters visibly sit at the back and White commuters at the front, as mandated by Jim Crow "White precedence" laws in the US (see Grossack, 1956). By rendering the social world intelligible through stark dichotomies of "us" versus "them," segregation fosters depersonalised perceptions of category members and cues related forms of comparison, differentiation, and bias (Oakes et al., 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; J. C. Turner et al., 1987).

It also plays a central role in the construction of social identities – that is, those aspects of the self that derive from our group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). While Social Identity Theory (SIT) prioritises groups as the primary source of self-concept, the importance of related place meanings cannot be overstated. Mills (1997, p. 506) captures this idea evocatively, describing segregated cities as " . . . a checkerboard of virtue and vice, light and dark space, ours and theirs." Through exposure to such meanings, individuals learn where they do and do not belong, coming to "know their place" (Keith, 1991). In this way, places serve as instruments of collective identity formation – our sense of *who we are* becomes inextricably tied to our sense of *where we are* (see Peng et al., 2020 for an overview of relevant research). Mundane behaviours themselves acquire different identity-related meanings depending on whether they unfold in "our" territories or "theirs". Donning a sport's team colours in Belfast, for instance, can signal either a deeply felt local affiliation or a transgressive – and risky – act of sectarian provocation, depending on where in the city such behaviour is displayed.

As the latter example implies, spatialised social identities can generate strong emotional attachments to place, expressing one aspect of what H. M. Proshansky (1978) called "place identity." Ingroup spaces come to be associated with belonging, attachment, security, comfort, and distinctiveness, outgroup spaces with alienation, uncertainty, anxiety, exclusion, and otherness. This process is examined in a relatively small but significant body of work that extends SIT into environmental psychology (e.g., Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2016; Bonaiuto et al., 1996; Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997; Reicher et al., 2006). Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira (2016), for instance, found that individuals' identification with their neighbourhood was closely linked to how they perceived both their own community and others nearby. Stronger place identity was associated with greater neighbourhood satisfaction and in-group favouritism, such that residents evaluated their own area and its inhabitants more positively. Conversely, outgroups (i.e., adjacent neighbourhoods) were differentiated, albeit in complexly patterned ways: some were seen as *comparable rivals*, others as *aspirational models*, and still others as *devalued areas to avoid*. These evaluations were also reflected in residents' spatial perceptions – participants psychologically "brought closer" admired neighbourhoods and "pushed away" stigmatised ones.

Our contribution is to show how such identity-related place meanings become implicated more specifically in the dynamics of boundary defence, contact avoidance, and resistance to desegregation (see also Garrido, 2013). These dynamics are activated as we interpret and respond to socio-spatial transitions. In this sense, H. Proshansky et al. (1983) spoke of the "mediating change" function of place identity relations (see also Speller et al., 2002). Desegregation, from this perspective, is not merely a demographic shift – it is a symbolic rupture (see Figure 4) that is often constructed as a "transgression" of the established socio-spatial order, blurring boundaries between self and other and destabilising long-standing bonds with place (cf. Manzo, 2014). As Sibley (1995) observes, such ruptures tend to provoke reactions framed in terms of danger, disorder, and symbolic pollution.[4] "Our" space begins to feel like "their" space, with insiders acting to preserve, defend or restore valued person-place relations and thus to re-establish intergroup boundaries.

In this way, the BTM may account for both short-term and long-term dynamics of resistance to desegregation. In the short term, constructions of

[4]Such constructions of place pollution, disorder and danger have been documented extensively in work on residential segregation in the US, particularly in sociological work during the 1950s and 60s. For example, Gans (1967) captured White homeowners' reactions to the ingress of Jewish and Black residents into "their" neighbourhoods as follows: " . . . their presence in suburbia is inimical to the very image of what a suburban community should be like. Jews and Negroes represent the city and all of the dirt, grime, haste, sweat and unloveliness of city life. Thus, their arrival not only lowers the status value of a neighbourhood, but for many it also cancels the suburban image of a suburb. As long as flight to uncontaminated areas is possible and feasible, it will be resorted to." (p.50).

boundary transgression may provoke immediate emotional responses, such as intergroup threat, "dislocation" (Dixon et al., 2024), and expressions of NIMBYism (Devine-Wright, 2009). Over the longer term, these acute reactions can aggregate and become embedded in collective and institutional practices that perpetuate spatial inequalities anew. In this way, cycles of transgression, resistance, and resegregation may stabilise over time into new, "naturalized" patterns of accommodation and avoidance.

This is precisely what occurred in Hout Bay. The arrival of Imizamo Yethu residents initially precipitated intergroup threat and negative attitudes via a well-known psychological pathway (Figure 4), as research in both social psychology and companion disciplines would predict (e.g., see Enos, 2014, 2016; Hangartner et al., 2019). They also entailed a spatial rupture. The new settlement was represented as transgressing Hout Bay's identity, destabilising long-standing person – place bonds (a human geographic pathway, Figure 4). White residents, in turn, responded through familiar strategies of boundary defence and adaptation (Figure 4), ultimately creating a new "geography of exclusion" (Sibley, 1995). Initial resistance to the establishment of Imizamo Yethu thus evolved from demands for removal to a sustained focus on containment, leading to new spatial configurations like buffer zones and perimeter fences that have endured for years.

We suggest that this dynamic pattern of transgression, resistance, and adaptation is neither one-off nor unique to Hout Bay. It gestures towards wider processes that are cyclical and "innovative" in character and through which segregation re-emerges with monotonous regularity in novel forms, marked by evolving spatial architectures, patterns of behaviour, and legitimating discourses. In Hout Bay, the relaxation of apartheid laws such as the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act opened the door to informal desegregation, but in response new logics of boundary defence, adaptation, and self-segregation emerged and sedimented. Hout Bay was only the beginning. Similar "landscapes of defence" (Gold & Revill, 1999) were soon replicated in "security estates" throughout South Africa (e.g., see Figure 1), often intertwined with constructions of place and identity (e.g., see Guyot et al., 2015).

Further evidencing the BTM

Residential relations in Northern Ireland and South Africa

Although residential segregation in Northern Ireland was not legally enforced, it has long been part of the urban fabric – especially in the capital city of Belfast. The city remains organised into areas of sectarian homogeneity: Catholic-majority areas in the west, Protestant areas in the east, a patchwork of sharply divided neighbourhoods in the north. Here, boundaries are not only symbolic but also physically reinforced by so-called "peace

walls" - interface barriers between communities originally erected as temporary security measures during the conflict. Far from disappearing with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the walls have increased in number and visibility (Jarman, 2012), maintaining a sectarian geography of identity, division, and avoidance.

Across multiple studies, we documented how these and related socio-spatial boundaries continue to shape the rhythms of everyday life. Using GPS tracking, GIS analytics, and walking interviews, we mapped the movements over time of 233 residents in and around north Belfast (Davies et al., 2019; Dixon, Tredoux, Davies, et al., 2020; J. Dixon et al., 2022; Huck et al., 2018). As Figure 5 shows, residents overwhelmingly remain within the zones associated with their own community. Where movement across boundaries does occur, it more typically occurs in cars – vehicular "bubbles" - rather than by foot, thereby limiting opportunities for contact (Davies et al., 2019).

Walking interviews proved valuable in revealing the environmental psychological meanings underpinning these patterns (see also Brown & Durrheim, 2009). Participants led us through local geographies of "safe" and "risky" routes, with some avoiding the "wrong" sides of streets, nearby shops, or even certain bus stops. One Protestant mother explained how she discouraged her son from using a local playground – not because it was

Figure 5. Tracking movements through, and time spent within, everyday activity spaces in north Belfast (adapted from Dixon, Tredoux, Davies, et al., 2020). Note: The left-hand panel provides estimates of raw time spent in different spaces by Protestant and Catholic respondents; the right-hand panel depicts the cumulative results of movement and destination tracking over a two-week period based on over 24 million GPS data points.

unsafe *per se*, but because it was "a Catholic space." Others described unease at their children passing through areas "belonging to the other side," particularly when wearing school uniforms or other symbols that marked their sectarian identity. Some spoke of "the walls" as a still necessary feature of the local environment, though others looked forward to their longer-term removal.

These accounts echo the logic of the BTM: proximity to spatial boundaries triggers concerns about transgression, belonging, and group identity, thus fostering defensive and avoidant behaviours. They also indicate the socio-spatial context in which government interventions to promote desegregation are perceived and evaluated.

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive launched its Together: Building a United Community strategy, pledging to remove all peace walls by 2023. Progress since then has been limited, however, partly due to concerns over local resistance. In our field survey of 488 residents in North Belfast (Dixon, Tredoux, Hocking, et al., 2020), we explored public attitudes towards peace wall removal using structural equation modelling. Three factors were associated with resistance: (1) proximity to interface areas, (2) perceptions of intergroup threat, and (3) the nature of prior contact experiences.

Proximity emerged as a powerful predictor: those living closest to the walls expressed the strongest opposition to their removal. This supports a key claim of the BTM, namely that material boundaries acquire heightened psychological significance in contexts where intergroup boundary threat is most acutely experienced. In North Belfast, these

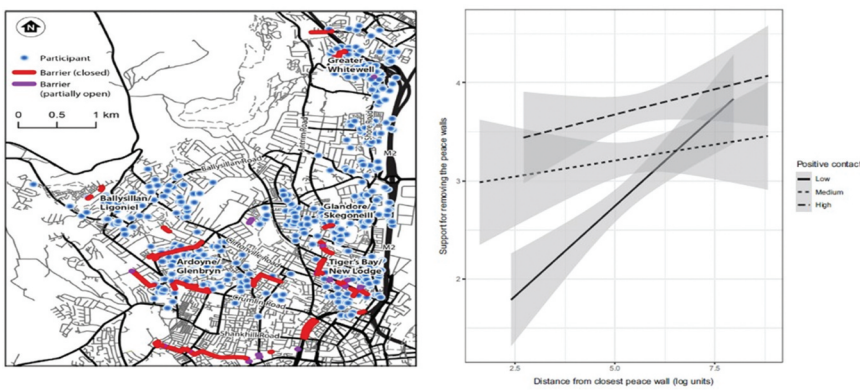

Figure 6. Positive contact moderates the effects of interface proximity on support for peace wall removal in north Belfast. Note: The left panel is a GIS image indicating the study area of north Belfast and the location of survey participants relative to interface barriers; the right panel indicates the relationship between participants' distance from the nearest barrier, self-reported degree of positive inter-community contact, and support for removing peace walls (adapted from Dixon, Tredoux, Hocking, et al., 2020).

threats were predominantly realistic rather than symbolic, perhaps reflecting residents' memories of violence and concerns about safety. The quality of contact also mattered. Positive intergroup contact experiences were associated with greater openness to wall removal. However, this effect was offset by negative contact experiences, which intensified resistance – even though such experiences were comparatively infrequent. As Figure 6 illustrates, positive contact also interacted with proximity to peace walls to mitigate opposition, though only up to a point. These findings exemplify the BTM's dual pathways in action: psychological and spatial processes together shape reactions to desegregation, amplifying one another in the context of potential boundary transgression.

Similar dynamics emerged in a South African case study in the city of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal (J. Dixon et al., 2023), where proximity to residential boundaries increased both opportunities for contact and anxieties about encroachment. Drawing on a stratified field survey of 364 Indian residents living at varying distances from informal Black African settlements, we again found that those living closer to spatial boundaries reported significantly higher levels of perceived threat, contact avoidance, and support for boundary fortification and removal policies. These effects were again mediated by realistic threat and moderated by the quality of intergroup contact: positive contact reduced threat, but its buffering effects were weaker at closer proximity. Together, these findings highlight the cyclical and context-sensitive nature of resistance to desegregation: even where integration becomes materially possible, the affective landscape of place-based identities may continue to hamper change, sustaining contact avoidance and impeding support for change.

Extensions to public and leisure spaces

Although most of the literature on segregation focuses on residential settings, public and leisure spaces are also vital domains for understanding how spatial and symbolic boundaries are enacted, negotiated, transgressed and defended. In such contexts, segregation is not simply imposed from above by government policy or structural factors: it also emerges dynamically through everyday decisions – where people choose to sit, walk, linger, congregate or avoid. Two case studies from our research – South African beaches and Belfast's parks -further illustrate this process.

At Scottburgh, a historically White beach south of Durban, we conducted observational research on patterns of spatial occupation and use (J. A. Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Durrheim & Dixon, 2005). As shown in Figure 7, despite formal desegregation, spatial clustering along racial lines remained striking. White beachgoers tended to occupy loosely defined "territories"- particularly

Figure 7. Mapping the micro-ecology of segregation on a South African beach (see Durrheim & Dixon, 2005 for more detailed discussion). Note: Each black circle = one black person; each white circle = one white person; each black triangle = one Indian person.

umbrella spaces- and avoided high-density zones populated by Black beachgoers. On certain public holidays, large-scale arrivals of Black families were met with conspicuous White withdrawal, a sequence captured in both our observations and interview data. This pattern of influx and withdrawal exemplifies how the process of resegregation may unfold through spontaneous avoidance and "flight" (Figure 4).

Interview accounts revealed divergent narratives about desegregation. Black beachgoers saw their access to Scottburgh as a welcome sign of democratic change. As one respondent put it, "It's beautiful that we are all allowed now." Yet they also noticed the avoidance behaviour of White beachgoers, often attributing it to residual fear and racism (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005). By contrast, White participants often spoke of feeling "swamped" or "pushed out," expressing nostalgia for a time when the beach was an exclusive place "to get away from it all" (J. Dixon & Durrheim, 2004). This sense of place alienation and "dislocation" mirrored a rupture in what Speller et al. (2002) call "place-referent continuity" - a loss of the experience of Scottburgh as a stable, comfortable, identity-affirming environment (see also Manzo, 2014). In BTM terms, desegregation was framed not simply as unwanted

contact, but also as a symbolic violation of place, resulting in new forms of boundary construction.[5]

A parallel story can be told of relations in Alexandra Park, Belfast – to our knowledge, the only park in Europe bisected by an interface barrier. Erected in 1994, this barrier physically divides Catholic and Protestant sections. In 2011, a gate was introduced to facilitate movement between the two sides (Figure 8), accompanied by celebratory media coverage proclaiming the park had "opened a door to peace". Images circulated in the national press of children from a local primary school running joyously through the just opened gate (McDonald, 2011).

Yet our data, derived from tracking studies and walking interviews (Dixon, Tredoux, Davies, et al., 2020, 2022; Hocking et al., 2019; Huck et al., 2018), indicate that the gate is rarely used. Instead, residents continue to occupy and feel ownership over "their" side of the park. Respondents described to us how the park was tacitly understood to

Figure 8. Alexandra Park peace wall with gate. Note: The side closest to the reader is the "Catholic side", the side through the gate is the "Protestant side". The gate currently opens between the hours of 7:30 am and 8:00pm.

[5]At Scottburgh beachfront, we were documenting the early stages of a broader cycle of resegregation (Booth & Mobona, 1988; Rogerson, 2017). We would argue that the human geography of the White family holiday subsequently transformed at a more global scale. Affluent holidaymakers increasingly retreated from busier "rainbow" beaches (e.g., Durban's Golden Mile) – as one of our interviewees called multiracial beaches – to more distant or privatised coastal reserves. Of course, many beaches remain geographically remote for Black South Africans, a structural legacy of residential apartheid (see Haffajee, 2019). Leisure space use is not simply a matter of preference and free choice.

remain divided: the "bottom part" belonged to Protestants; the "top part" to Catholics. Activities such as walking dogs or sitting on benches were associated with comfort, belonging, and sometimes even nostalgic childhood memories – so long as they occurred within the appropriate zone. Approaching the peace wall, by contrast, was described as provoking unease or even fear. These reactions exemplify the BTM's human geographic pathway: even in ostensibly open and integrated spaces, spatialised identities persist, reinforcing segregation through embodied habits, affective attachments, and wariness over "crossing the line".

The persistence of these spatial divisions is not confined to Alexandra Park. As Bairner and Shirlow (2003), Hocking et al. (2019), and Lang and Mell (2020) have all shown, many public facilities across Belfast are subject to continuing *de facto* segregation, hindering local initiatives to promote shared space. Community members often avoid leisure centres or civic spaces located in outgroup areas, citing discomfort, fear of attack, and concerns over feeling "out of place". These patterns reflect what Boal (1969) termed the "territorial" organisation of everyday life in Belfast – a socio-spatial logic that reproduces division long after formal conflict has ended.

Applied implications

The BTM has implications for how social psychologists conceptualise and promote social change in divided societies. The traditional contact hypothesis emphasises the transformation of *person-person* relations as key to building support for desegregation, integration, and positive contact. This remains a crucial objective that informs interventions along the psychological pathway in our model. Our findings, however, suggest a necessary complementary focus: the transformation of *person – place* relations, as captured in the human geographic pathway. Beyond reducing prejudice, promoting social change requires interventions that foster place-based inclusion, encouraging residents to "cross the line," walk through the gate, and reimagine contested or unfamiliar spaces as shared.

Interventions in the psychological pathway

Research on the contact hypothesis underpins efforts to reduce resistance to desegregation: intergroup contact experiences shape many of the processes unfolding along the BTM's psychological pathway. Negative contact experiences – historically underexplored but increasingly recognised – may perpetuate a dismal spiral of avoidance and boundary defence (Barlow et al., 2012; Graf et al., 2014; Meleady & Forder, 2019; Paolini et al., 2010). Such experiences, for example, heighten fears over desegregation in neighbourhoods in

north Belfast (Dixon, Tredoux, Davies, et al., 2020, 2022). By contrast, positive contact may set in motion a "virtuous circle" of longer-term acceptance of desegregated environments, including greater support for policies to promote integration and equality amongst members of historically advantaged groups (see Coco et al., 2023). Positive contact in childhood also predicts greater use of integrated settings in later life (Braddock & McPartland, 1989; P. B. Wood & Sonleitner, 1996).

As we have seen, however, often residential desegregation leads to conflict, flight or boundary defence rather than positive contact. Stevenson et al. (2020) introduced the construct of *collective confidence in contact* (CCIC) to capture how perceptions of group-level efficacy in managing intergroup encounters might be leveraged to promote successful residential mixing (see also R. N. Turner & Cameron, 2016). Across two neighbourhood studies, they found that CCIC mediated the effects of community identification and intragroup support on intergroup contact and attitudes. Stronger community identity predicted greater neighbourly support, which in turn reduced intergroup anxiety and fostered a shared belief that contact with outsiders was both possible and worthwhile. This group-level confidence predicted both the frequency and positivity of contact. Their work thus showed how psychosocial resources within communities can reduce resistance to desegregation – not by weakening ingroup ties, but by mobilising them as a basis for engagement and acceptance of outsiders.

Interventions to shift local norms about cross-group interactions are another potentially important intervention on the social psychological pathway. In contexts such as South Africa, for example, such norms have historically embedded racist assumptions, rooted in the apartheid ideology of "separate spheres", which inscribed concerns over cultural assimilation and miscegenation[6] (Foster & Finchilescu, 1986). It is not coincidental, then, that contact theorists have consistently highlighted the importance of norms and institutional authority in ensuring support for integration (Allport, 1954; K. B. Clark, 1953; Wilner et al., 1952) or that recent work has linked normative processes to patterns of contact avoidance (e.g., Ditlmann & Turkoglu, 2025).

Interventions in the human geographic pathway

The organisation of space itself conveys powerful messages about the normativity of contact, as Deutsch and Collins's (1951) highlighted in their classic study of public housing (see especially Chapter 6). Urban design

[6]Norms have shifted in post-apartheid South Africa to accommodate limited racial integration by class, notably in wealthy housing estates. In the name of crime prevention, such estates are also marked increasingly by normative forms of securitisation - walls, guarded access, and armed response to intruders are now standard features (e.g., Durington, 2006).

may signal whether a given space is intended for intergroup interaction or exclusion. Segregated spaces communicate both *inductive* norms – inferred from observed patterns of use, presence, and avoidance – and *deductive* norms, conveyed through custom, signage, "territorial personalisation" (Greenbaum & Greenbaum, 1981), or other place symbolism. For those living near boundary interfaces, the everyday experience of segregation may thus become *normatively saturated*, shaping residents' expectations about who belongs where and under what conditions contact is permissible. The norms communicated by Northern Irish peace walls and South African buffer zones are not subtle: they broadcast shared assumptions about the undesirability of interaction "across the line". Yet such assumptions can also be conveyed more implicitly (e.g., "servicescapes" in restaurants or bars may imply who belongs through décor, music, dress codes, and so on).

Urban design interventions that promote contact exposure by signalling norms of inclusion are thus a promising route to social change. A growing body of research – some explicitly grounded in the contact hypothesis – explores the role of:

- **Bridging infrastructure**: Locating shared facilities between affluent and deprived areas to encourage co-location and incidental contact (Nilforoshan et al., 2023).
- **Inclusive public spaces**: Designing markets, museums, restaurants, and cafés as "spaces of encounter", fostering diverse participation and norms of inclusion, interaction, and belonging (Watson & Studdert, 2006; Holubowska & Poorthuis, 2024; Piekut & Valentine, 2017).
- **Reduced exclusionary barriers**: Removing material and symbolic barriers (e.g., entry fees) to create spaces that foster equal status encounters (Knipprath et al., 2021).
- **Shared education initiatives**: Transporting pupils between historically divided schools for joint activities, reshaping norms of intergroup behaviour by "crossing boundaries" - even in post-accord settings where full educational integration is difficult to achieve (Loader, 2022).
- **Public art**: Replacing exclusionary symbols (e.g., sectarian wall murals) with inclusive imagery to promote shared identity and mutual belonging (Bryan & Stevenson, 2009; https://visualartists.ie/the-building-peace-through-the-arts-re-imaging-communities-programme/.
- **Participatory placemaking**: Co-designing shared spaces such as community gardens to foster cooperation, joint ownership, and place pride (*A Playbook for Inclusive Placemaking; https://www.pps.org/article/a-playbook-for-inclusive-placemaking-community-process*).
- **Civic rituals to create unifying public spaces**: Reconfiguring public events that serve to reflect and represent the population – such as

Belfast's St Patrick's Day parade – to cultivate civic unity through shared use of public space (Stevenson, 2010).

These examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Our aim is to highlight the value of closer dialogue between intergroup contact researchers and practitioners in urban design, education, public policy, and architecture. The potential role of contact in reducing concerns over peace wall removal in Northern Ireland offers an apt closing example, illustrating how understanding the interaction of spatial and psychological dynamics can inform intervention. As Dixon, Tredoux, Hocking, et al. (2020) demonstrate, physical proximity to peace walls heightens perceptions of threat and increases opposition to their removal, but this effect is *moderated* by experiences of positive intergroup contact. The applied implication is clear: urban design interventions to dismantle spatial barriers such as peace walls might be complemented by parallel interventions that promote positive contact, especially in areas of intergroup proximity, where concerns about boundary threat are heightened.

Conclusion

Eight years after he founded the first permanent European settlement in South Africa in 1660, Jan Van Riebeeck, the colonial administrator of the Cape, planted a seven-kilometre-long hedge of Bitter Almonds and Hawthorn, stretching from Rondebosch to the Milnerton lagoon. It was an archetypal moment of boundary construction, capturing not only the colonial origins of the system of segregation that culminated in Apartheid, but also the interwoven social psychology and human geography it inscribed. As Naidoo (2004), p. 1) observed a decade after the fall of apartheid, "The hedge was meant to protect the colonists. On this side they would have Europe, while Africa should stay on the other. Van Riebeeck's hedge is deeply symbolic of South Africa's colonial past – a past that is deeply scarred with struggles over physical boundaries that reflect boundaries in the mind."

Our paper sets out to explain why informal patterns of segregation persist in societies that have undergone processes of sociopolitical change, supposedly moving into a "post-conflict" era of democracy and integration. Drawing on a 25-year programme of empirical work in South Africa and Northern Ireland, we have proposed a theoretical model that conceptualises resistance to desegregation as a collective response to the construction of boundary transgression. The BTM identifies two interrelated pathways – a social psychological pathway and a human geographic pathway – that together help to account for the cyclical, adaptive, and context-sensitive dynamics of (re)segregation.

Contributions and limitations

A strength of the BTM is its *parsimony*. It captures the social psychological dimension of a complex, multi-layered, phenomenon using a relatively small set of interacting processes. Rather than multiplying explanatory variables, the model imposes conceptual order on a field often characterised by scattered analyses of isolated factors. In this way, it offers a coherent framework for integrating an array of empirical findings – from studies of social identification, contact avoidance, homophily, prejudice, and intergroup threat to studies of territoriality, mobility, boundary transgression, and place-based attachments and identities.

The model also broadens the explanatory horizon of social psychology by foregrounding *the human geographic pathway*. This has received limited attention in our discipline but is critical to understanding the persistence of segregation. Segregation shapes not only who individuals are likely to meet, but also where they feel they belong, where they feel safe or threatened, and how they interpret and respond to boundary transgressions. These dynamics are not merely symbolic. As we have shown, they are encoded within the built environment, influencing spatial practices, architectural design, and both policymaker and community responses to desegregation.

Perhaps most important, the BTM captures the cyclical yet "innovative" nature of segregation (see also Krysan & Crowder, 2017) – that is, how boundary transgressions entail both the reassertion and the evolution of spatial divisions. As our case studies illustrate, desegregation often precipitates defensive adaptations: buffer zones, gated developments, visual screening, selective mobility, evolving patterns of micro-ecological avoidance, and symbolic re-territorialisation. In this respect, segregation is not simply a historical residue that endures through structural inertia: it entails dynamic cycles of reaction, adaptation, and boundary reconstruction.

In tracing these processes, the model also sets a broader agenda for social change. If desegregation is to succeed, then it must extend beyond *person–person* interventions aimed at promoting prejudice reduction – though these remain vital. It must also transform *person–place* relations, reshaping how individuals move through, identify with, and emotionally inhabit contested or unfamiliar environments. This shift creates opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration with urban planners, community leaders, and policymakers. It also challenges psychologists to reckon more seriously with the socio-spatial dimensions of division and exclusion. Sometimes, the barriers fall, the gates open, and yet people still do not "cross the line". Understanding what to do about

this issue remains an urgent challenge for societies seeking to overcome the historical legacy of segregation.

Turning to limitations, we recognise that the BTM does not elaborate on the vital role of structural and economic forces in shaping patterns of (re)segregation (e.g., D. S. Massey & Denton, 1993). These forces interact in varying ways with the psychological and human geographic dynamics on which we have concentrated. Krysan and Crowder's (2017) work, for example, elegantly demonstrates how "cognitive heuristics", social networks, and institutional practices combine to sustain housing segregation in the United States. The BTM is intended to complement, not replace, such detailed, multilevel, accounts. We do not pretend to offer a catch-all explanation of, let alone solution to, a notoriously overdetermined phenomenon.

We also wish to pre-empt a related misreading of our argument – namely, the idea that persistent segregation is somehow an inevitable outcome of "basic" psychological or geographic processes. That is not our claim. We acknowledge that boundary crossings can, and often do, generate positive, even emancipatory experiences. Witness, for example, the fall of the Berlin Wall. Moreover, stable integrated communities exist, even in highly segregated societies (Ellen, 2000). Indeed, as we have shown our own research, the desegregation of spaces such as public beaches can be experienced as hopeful and liberating. Its *construction* as boundary transgressive is the outcome of particular – often interested and ideological – modes of representation, embedded within wider historical and political patterns of intergroup relations.

Finally, we acknowledge that BTM has evolved to understand relations in two of the most starkly divided societies of the modern era: post-apartheid South Africa and post-accord Northern Ireland. These societies are often regarded as cases *in extremis*. South Africa's apartheid system has been called the "highest stage of white supremacy" (Cell, 1982), while Northern Ireland is dubbed colloquially "a place apart." Although these cases elucidate the interplay of psychological and spatial dynamics in resegregation, they may not generalise fully to societies where divisions are less pronounced, where segregation operates through more diffuse mechanisms, or where historical legacies of institutional or enforced separation are less salient. For example, while our model emphasises boundary transgression as key to understanding resistance to desegregation, this process may function differently in societies where intergroup boundaries are more permeable or where segregation is driven more by economic stratification than by ideological or identity-based divisions. Future research should explore how the dynamics we identify apply in other contexts, including multiethnic urban settings, societies with fluid rather than rigid intergroup boundaries, and contexts where segregation emerges through voluntary self-selection rather than historical or institutional enforcement. We propose some additional research directions below.

Future directions

Extension to other contexts

The focus of our work has been on racial and sectarian desegregation; however, the BTM may also apply to other domains of contested belonging. For example, the transgression of gendered boundaries in public spaces is carefully policed in many societies.[7] Future research might thus explore intersection between gender, boundary processes, and cultural and religious norms, particularly in the context of the transition to greater gender equality. Similarly, the entry of individuals who identify as transgender into spaces deemed "inappropriate" has increasingly provoked moral panic in some cultural settings. Investigating this process may shed light on the hetero-normative assumptions embedded within constructions of everyday spaces and the kinds of encounters they accommodate or proscribe. Class-based contestations of gentrified urban areas offer another potential avenue of research – unusual in that they entail historically advantaged groups moving into areas occupied by historically disadvantaged communities, a reversal of the traditional pattern of racial and ethnic desegregation.

Perhaps most timely is the BTM's potential extension to contexts of mass immigration. Research on intergroup contact took shape amid the mid-century upheavals of racial desegregation in the US, as neighbourhoods, schools, the armed forces, and workplaces were dramatically reconfigured (Brophy, 1946; Deutsch & Collins, 1951; Star et al., 1949/1958). Today, the forces of globalisation and migration are producing comparable ruptures across Europe and beyond, redrawing social and spatial boundaries at inter-personal, neighbourhood, regional, and national levels. Boundary transgression, we would argue, is again central to the study of intergroup contact. Research has already shown that positive interactions between immigrant and host communities can foster more positive intergroup attitudes (e.g., Achard et al., 2024; Koopmans & Veit, 2014). However, as early desegregation research reminds us (K. B. Clark, 1953), the outcomes of contact and desegregation are always contingent. Among other factors, we would argue, they are shaped by local boundary dynamics, i.e., whether movement of migrants into new areas is accommodated or constructed as a transgressive process (see also Bochner's (1982) prescient discussion). Thus, in their "natural experiment" on Greek islands near the Turkish coast, Hangartner

[7] A case study of microlevel segregation in Israel illustrates how boundary maintenance and transgression is connected to the gendered relations in public spaces, particularly in Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) areas (Shapira-Rosenberg, 2010). Across diverse settings – buses, clinics, post offices, sidewalks – emerging norms have relegated women to marginal positions, illustrating "the desire to remove women from the public realm in order to maintain the gender hierarchy" (p.13). In a widely publicised case, Anya Rosenblit, an Israeli woman who boarded a bus from Ashdod to Jerusalem in December 2011, refused to move the back of the bus despite vocal demands by Haredi men, thereby violating local norms of "modesty". Studying such contested boundaries highlights how public space itself becomes an arena for asserting and resisting exclusion.

et al. (2019) found that an influx of refugees led to lasting increases in hostility towards refugees, immigrants, and Muslim minorities, as well as support for restrictive immigration policies.

The need for greater interdisciplinary integration

As we hope to have made clear, explaining the persistence of segregation is an inherently interdisciplinary project. In developing the BTM, we have drawn heavily on urban sociology, human geography, and environmental psychology. The significance of these fields lies not only in the conceptual and empirical insights they provide. They also offer powerful methodological tools underused in social psychology. In our own research, for example, we have embraced emerging "mobile methods" to explore activity space segregation – combining walking interviews, GPS tracking, and GIS analytics to map how segregation unfolds across time, scale, and domain (Huck et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2019; Dixon, Tredoux, Davies, et al., 2020; Dixon, Tredoux, Hocking, et al., 2020, 2022).

At the same time, we believe the social psychology of intergroup processes, including research on the contact hypothesis, can enrich work in allied disciplines. Its granular analyses of the "preferential dimension" of contact seeking, avoidance, and resegregation (Kauff et al., 2021; Paolini et al., 2018) offer nuanced concepts and methods for understanding behaviours that, in other literatures, are viewed mainly through a structural or institutional lens. In a similar way, fine-grained observations of microecological patterns – such as seating arrangements or movement patterns in shared spaces – reveals how the contact and segregation unfolds "on the ground" (Bettencourt et al., 2019). It thus promises insights into lived experiences that are easily obscured in macro-level analyses of residential distributions.

"Social frontiers" as a conceptual and methodological lens

Social frontiers, a concept developed by Iyer and Pryce (2024) and colleagues, provide a powerful lens through which to study intergroup relations across disciplinary boundaries. These frontiers mark intergroup dividing lines that are typically delineated by abrupt contrasts in spatial design, demography, and socioeconomic status (e.g., see Figure 1 above). They represent not only symbolic boundaries, but also material zones of "throwtogetherness" (D. Massey, 2005) that generate both friction and transformation potential.

To echo Sibley (1995), social frontiers embody the "strong classification" of space and thus become flashpoints where boundaries are enforced, negotiated, crossed, and contested. Empirically, they offer a productive focus for comparative research. We have found that studying relations along frontiers can illuminate *both* intergroup contact and solidarity *and* intergroup threat

and contact avoidance, e.g., as captured by evidence on the so-called "irony of proximity" (J. Dixon et al., 2023). Other researchers are exploring how proximity to frontiers may impact on political attitudes, crime, community trust and solidarity, and mental health (e.g., Albzour et al., 2023; Dean et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2024; Penic et al., 2024). We anticipate the study of frontier boundary characteristics such as permeability, mutuality and legitimacy may prove important in future work.

Boundary transgression as collective resistance

In post-colonial contexts and settler societies, the concept of "frontier" acquires additional resonance, bringing into focus the idea that boundary transgression is sometimes a form of resistance to socio-spatial exclusion. Power asymmetries fundamentally shape the construction, inhabitation, and contestation of space, influencing who has the capacity to enforce boundaries or interpret another's presence as a threat. While the research on which the BTM has focused primarily on the dynamics of resistance from the perspective of historically dominant groups – such as White South Africans – a critical future direction is to explicitly incorporate a theory of power and positionality within the model. This would involve examining how marginalised communities understand and experience boundary crossings, particularly when they are framed as the transgressors.

For members of such groups, for instance, boundary "transgressions" may involve both positive opportunities to access-valued resources and negative experiences of being treated as intruders or "outsiders". At the same time, they may enact collective resistance against socio-spatial exclusion by reasserting presence, reclaiming space, and generating alternative place meanings that challenge dominant narratives of belonging. The establishment of Imizamo Yethu (see p. 11) – a place name meaning "our struggle" in the Xhosa language – serves as a powerful illustration of this, signifying the community's agency in claiming residence in an area previously reserved for Whites under apartheid.

From ruptures to routines

Desegregation disrupts the normative socio-spatial order, bringing into view dynamics that may otherwise unfold in more routine ways. The BTM focuses mainly on such ruptures (e.g., responses to policies to bring down peace walls) or related moments of transition (e.g., when students transfer from segregated schools to diverse university spaces). However, our work has also touched on more mundane and complementary processes. In our GPS tracking work in Belfast, for instance, we traced the habitual pathways residents took while engaging in day-to-day activities like shopping, jogging, walking their dog, or escorting children to school. These patterns constituted

a "time geography" of contact and avoidance, emerging as undramatic features of participants' everyday lives (Dixon et al., 2020a; 2022).

Understanding the persistence of segregation requires attention not only to moments of boundary transgression but also to these more mundane practices (Paolini et al., 2025). Viewed historically, for instance, resistance to desegregation appears to follow a temporal logic: (1) boundary change occurs or is threatened; (2) transgressions are noticed, given collective significance, and resisted or accommodated; and (3) then new trajectories of contact and segregation emerge. Such trajectories are naturalised over time, becoming part of "the new normal", even as emotional triggers like threat and prejudice remain close to the surface.

The psychology of habit – surprisingly neglected in the literature on intergroup relations – may thus offer a powerful and novel explanatory lens (W. Wood, 2017), drawing attention to how segregation is sustained not only through deliberative intention, but also through repetition, ease, automaticity, and daily routine (Paolini et al., forthcoming). Inculcated through habit, segregation becomes "business as usual" - part of the choreography of everyday life.

Greater reflexivity about evolving modes of segregation

Perhaps above all, as social psychologists we need to remain vigilant to evolving patterns of segregation, which restrict the forms of contact we want to study, understand, and encourage. The "gated communities" springing up across South Africa find analogues in the defensive architecture of many societies (Webster et al., 2002). The rise of "vertical cities" worldwide has ushered in a new era of "vertical segregation" (see Maloutas & Karadimitriou, 2022), with buildings stratified upwards so that interaction between richer and poorer inhabitants is limited and access to valued resources (e.g., city views, gyms, rooftop gardens) distributed unevenly. There has likewise been a creeping "privatization" and "sanitization" of public spaces in many cities – sometimes captured under the gloomy banner "the end of public space" (Mitchell, 1995) – that aims to regulate unwanted encounters (e.g., with the homeless). Gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods is concentrating the wealthy in revitalised urban cores, exacerbating spatial divides along ethnic and socioeconomic lines (DiMasso et al., 2011; Somashekhar, 2024). Surprisingly often, too, segregation resurfaces in the ironic guise of interventions to promote integration (see Lemanski, 2006, for a grimly instructive South African example). And, of course, how such material forms of segregation interact with the rapid evolution of virtual and online "spaces" adds yet another layer of complexity (e.g., McIllwain, 2016).

To what extent do any of these – and we have mentioned only a few – emerging forms of segregation feature in the psychological literature on

intergroup contact, desegregation and social change? Our closing message is thus simple: in seeking to promote contact, we need to be more reflexive, more agile, and more interventionist in how we treat countervailing processes of (re)segregation. We need to move into closer dialogue with researchers working in companion fields such as environmental psychology, human geography and urban sociology, and with practitioners in urban planning, public policy, and architecture. This is essential if contact research is to move beyond the study of anodyne relations unfolding under "optimal" conditions to confront the stark realities of a social world in which boundaries to interaction remain stubbornly persistent, all too often becoming their own antidote.

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