

# **AN APPLICATION OF CONVERSATIONAL THINKING TO THE PROBLEM OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## **Abstract**

The problem of racial discrimination in South Africa speaks to the question of who is to be included and excluded from South African society. South African society before the advent of democracy structurally and politically was built on exclusionary policies that are disadvantageous to those classified as blacks, colored (mixed raced individuals), and Indians (South Africans of Indian descent), respectively. To unpack the nature of this racial discrimination, I will start by showing how the historical workings of Apartheid policies contribute to the continued problem of racial discrimination in South Africa. I argue that the problem of racial discrimination in present-day South Africa can best be analyzed from new perspectives motivated by the legacies of Apartheid. One such perspective is the value of what I call racial complementarity. I tap into conversational thinking to show how we can rethink the problem of racial discrimination using a different framework other than ubuntu that has failed to adequately address racial discrimination despite its humanistic values. To go beyond ubuntu, one of the ways of addressing racial discrimination would be to cultivate the orientation of racial complementarity. I employed conversational thinking as my preferred methodology for managing the relationship of seemingly opposed variables like the racial lines in South Africa, making it possible for seemingly opposed variables to interact harmoniously and complement one another in ways that dispel unequal and discriminatory treatment of individuals within any society.

**Keywords:** Inequality, Segregation, Complementarity, Conversational thinking, South Africa.

## **Introduction**

The attempt to analyze the problem of racial discrimination within the framework of conversational thinking requires careful unpacking. This is because much of the literature on the problem of racial discrimination has been explored from a threefold perspective: reconciliation, reparations, and restitution (NADINE n.d.n. 2014). None of these solutions, mentioned here, has been able to adequately address the reality of discrimination, inequality, and segregation in South Africa. The preceding presupposes that the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa asks the question of who is to be included and excluded from the gains and discourses of South African society. The South African society before the advent of democracy structurally and politically was built on exclusionary policies that are disadvantageous to those classified as blacks (natives), colored (mixed raced individuals), and Indians (South Africans of Indian descent) respectively.

To unpack the nature of this racial discrimination, I start by showing how the historical workings of Apartheid policies contribute to the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa. I argue that the problem of racial discrimination in present-day South Africa can best be analysed from a new perspective other than Apartheid history. This new perspective, I argue, is the absence of the orientation of mutual interdependence. I tap into conversational thinking to show that one veritable way of addressing this challenge would be to look at other strategies other than ubuntu that emphasize racial complementarity which is a basic idea that is hidden in ubuntu values but better emphasized in conversational thinking. Conversational thinking provides a methodological disposition for managing the relationship of seemingly opposed variables like the racial lines in South Africa, making it possible for opposed variables to interact harmoniously and complement one another in ways that dispel unequal and discriminatory treatment of individuals within any society.

In this paper, I present a description of some of the basic features of discrimination in South Africa today, enshrined in Apartheid history, and how Apartheid's history contributes to the systemic manifestations of racial discrimination in South Africa today. This is followed by a discussion on the method of conversational thinking and how racial discrimination contradicts the

tenets of conversational thinking. Following this discussion, I present an understanding of relationships as drawn from the method of conversational thinking that best capture, as well as respond to, the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa. In doing so, I chart a pathway to how South Africa can begin to creatively engage the idea of conversational thinking in the reconstruction of a more tolerant South Africa.

### **An Overview of the Historical Foundations of Apartheid and the Problem of Discrimination in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

South Africa during Apartheid operated under certain policies that were enacted to maintain the goal of Apartheid, which was separateness (PETERS 2004; OELOFSEN, 2013; MHLAULI n.d.n 2015). Walter Peters argues that the policy of ‘separateness’ or separate development was the basis for South Africa’s social formation during the latter half of the twentieth century (PETERS, 2004), and was an administrative mechanism used by the architects of Apartheid to control and keep black South Africans from the wealth and gains of white South Africa. Rianna Oelofsen (2013) explains how the policy of separateness in South Africa determined every aspect of life in South Africa. For example, the policy determined what kind of employment one was eligible for, where you could live, with whom you could interact, as well as with whom you could be in a sexual or romantic relationship (*ibid*). The policy of separate development was also what led to the creation of Bantustans and townships – the only places where those categorized as blacks could live at the time. The Bantustans and townships were created as an administrative mechanism to separate and control the different race groups during Apartheid. However, this policy of separateness, entrenched during Apartheid, was a continuation of the Land Act that was implemented by the British colonialists (PETERS 2004).

During colonialism, the Land Act of 1913 was responsible for racial segregation as those categorised as blacks were not recognised as part of white South Africa. However, during Apartheid, the Group Areas Act was implemented to further entrench and forcibly remove those classified as Africans, Indians,

and Coloreds from urban areas that were set aside as the exclusive preserve of whites. The Group Area Act from the 1950s to 1960s mandated residential segregation throughout the country to divide and control racially separate communities.<sup>1</sup> The alienation of black South Africans and their forceful removal from South Africa's urban areas to the Bantustans and townships further increased the problem of landlessness and economic inequality between white and black South Africans (PETERS, 2004). The forceful removal of black South Africans to the Bantustans and townships entrenched racial inequality between white and black South Africans, given that black South Africans were not allowed land ownership in the Bantustans or townships. All these problems (of economic inequality, landlessness and segregation experienced by Black South Africans) stem from one common denominator – racial discrimination (See MODIRI 2015; SEEKINGS & NATRASS 2006; WESTAWAY 2010).

One would have hoped that the problems of racial discrimination, injustice, inequality, and poverty would have been addressed during the new democratic dispensation that has been in place since 1994 (JACOBS n.d.n. 2003). However, this is not the case, as discrimination injustice, inequality, and poverty remain an undeniable part of South African society more than twenty-five years into a democratic dispensation. The high rate of poverty among black South Africans also promotes a pattern of discrimination and intolerance that is mostly targeted towards those labelled foreigners (that is Africans of non-South African descent), which has resulted in different biased mindsets, as well as xenophobic attacks, against Africans of non-south African descent. One can argue that discrimination, segregation, and inequality are no longer lawfully enforced in South Africa. However, the influences of colonialism and Apartheid continue to feature in the material conditions that characterize economic and social relations in South Africa. The fact that Apartheid's legacies still influence and sustain segregation and attitudes of discrimination in the lived experiences of present-day South Africans, I argue, shows that the orientation of

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<sup>1</sup> South Africans History Online. Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy. [Overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?Id=65-259-6](http://Overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?Id=65-259-6). Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.

mutual interdependence is mostly lacking. I also argue that the solution to the continued problem of racial discrimination lies in the ability and willingness of the post-apartheid government to adequately address the inequities that sustain systemic injustice, racial inequality that manifest in the different forms of discrimination as experienced in present-day South Africa.

Now, there are at least three ways in which discrimination and inequality are being expressed in Post-Apartheid South Africa: (1) through attitudes of intolerance (2) economic or financial inequality (3) systemic discrimination of Africans of non-south African descent. When we begin to analyze the manifestations and expressions of racial discrimination, racism can also be construed as a contributing factor to the issue of discrimination, inequality, and segregation in South Africa. Furthermore, racism has also taken other forms as the South African society is not legally governed by Apartheid policies that allow for public expressions of racism. Racism is still being expressed in subtle forms in South Africa. One such example of racism is when some white apartment owners prefer people of non-African descent to black South Africans or Africans of non-South African descent. Economic inequality, on the other hand, is the reason why the majority of black South Africans cannot afford to live in the same residential areas as white South Africans who are well to do economically. Low-quality education is another problem that most black South African children suffer due to economic inequality.

From the preceding claim, one can also argue that economic inequality can become one of the factors that account for the difference between average academic performance when comparing white and black South African children.<sup>2</sup> Thus, poor black children living in the townships and rural areas can only attend sub-standard government schools due to the inability to afford tuition fees at suburban semi-private schools. The standard of education poor black children receive in South Africa cannot be compared to that of white children whose parents can afford to give them a better standard education in private or semi-private schools. Economic inequality sustains a system of discrimination and segregation that creates

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<sup>2</sup>See: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report%2092-01-03/Report%2092-01-032016.pdf>

oppositions in terms of race relations. This problem of discrimination and race relation also stretches to Africans of non-south African descent, as seen in the patterns of racial bifurcations and oppositions that result in systemic discrimination. I, therefore, characterize economic inequality as one of the major issues in any discussion concerning race relations, discrimination, segregation, and exclusion in South Africa. To address the problem of discrimination and exclusion in South Africa, the South African government must also be intentional in transforming mindsets that sustain the ‘we against them’ mentality in South Africa. The ‘we against them’ mentality is that attitude or mindset that beclouds human reasoning and prevents it from seeing beyond the bifurcations and oppositions, inherent in two-valued logic, as is the case with the racial divides in South Africa. What this means is that without a changed mindset the goal of equality whether economic or social will only become a mirage.

To address the problem of racial discrimination in this manner, I will start by looking at the tenets of conversational thinking and highlight some ways in which the problem of discrimination in South Africa has been analyzed. I will then argue for an understanding of equality that dispels the act of discrimination through conversational thinking. It is through the lens of conversational thinking that I intend to show the nuanced nature of South Africa’s system of discrimination and how best to forge a better path for South Africa. At this point, a discussion on conversational thinking is in order.

### **An Application of Conversational Thinking to the problem of Racial Discrimination in South Africa**

In this section, I construct an understanding of equality within the framework of conversational thinking that will help address South Africa’s problem of racial discrimination. It is important that I first clarify what is meant by conversational thinking.

*What is Conversational Thinking?*

The method of conversationalism has been developed and employed by many scholars in the conversational tradition (See CHIMAKONAM 2014; 2015; 2017a; 2018; NWEKE 2015; EDET 2015; ATTOE 2015; 2021; SEGUN 2015; EGBAI 2018; AGADA 2019). In conversational thinking exchanges and responses are critically evaluated in terms of thoughts, ideas, and theories of the opposed other with the possibility of reaching an alternative position and not necessarily a synthesis (CHIMAKONAM 2018). Conversational thinking involves a critical and creative engagement between epistemic agents namely, *nwa-nsa* or the proponent, and *nwa-nju* or the opponent (CHIMAKONAM 2015). *Nmeko* (or relationship) is crucial in the infrastructure of this method in that it is through the relationship of two seemingly opposed variables that new ideas are birthed (CHIMAKONAM 2015). This engagement is guided by two types of motions, namely, the conjunctive and the disjunctive motions (CHIMAKONAM 2017b). In the former, opposed variables come together in complementation, and in the latter, the relationship collapses and they move away from each other until such a time when conversation brings them close again. When similar variables engage in any kind of relationship it is assumed that less conflict would arise from these relationships. But when the variables are different, like those of different racial groups, the relationship becomes that of creative struggle (CHIMAKONAM 2018).

This creative struggle is to be regulated if one is to avoid, on the one extreme, crossing the benoke point, where they each lose their identities; and on the other extreme, the tension of incommensurables, where they violently break away from each other (CHIMAKONAM 2019). A good example of the former in race relations would be a race-blind interaction between the different race groups in South Africa. For the latter, a good example would be any kind of inequality that encourages discrimination, exclusion, and xenophobia, which naturally militates against complementary relationships. For example, the problem of racism, segregation, and racial inequality in Apartheid South Africa, as well as its manifestations in present-day South Africa, negates the idea of conversational thinking in the sense that opposed variables have remained opposed in a contradictory way as seen in the problem of race relations.

On this note, one can argue that race relation is still a problem given that the different race groups have remained opposed despite the call to imbibe the consciousness of ubuntu in dealing with the legacies of Apartheid in present-day South Africa. The preceding suggests that South Africa has come to a point where new strategies or policies implementation should be tailored towards transforming race relations. The systemic exclusion and stereotyping of Africans by Africans show that the problem of race relations in South Africa has metamorphosed into a triangular situation. What this means is that the systemic discrimination of Black South Africans by White South Africans is creating a different shade of discrimination that I call triangular racial discrimination. Triangular racial discrimination is a form of systemic exclusion that excludes people of other cultural descent on the basis of difference. It is a system that demonises human differences rather than building on its benefits.

The continued problem of racial discrimination as witnessed in South Africa is hinged on the fact that most persons are yet to overcome their racial differences. This, then, metamorphosises into the desire by some victims of discrimination to exact the violence they experience, not on their oppressors (who are often beyond reach) but on more vulnerable targets that are within their reach – usually black women, black children, and/or non-white foreigners in South Africa. The complexity in understanding race relations, as well as discrimination in South Africa, leaves one with the question of what is next? The manifestations of what I call the race triangle, as seen in race relations as well as in biases and stereotypes of different forms against difference, presupposes that the time has come for a transformative change that allows for the thriving of positive individual differences. To achieve this goal, I believe that a racially discriminatory mindset ought to be replaced with a complementary mindset.

One would wonder why I prefer the complementary ethics to Ubuntu ethics, which undergirds South African society and has also been employed in practical terms, like in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). The fact that Ubuntu has been criticised by scholars as having failed is no longer new in scholarly philosophical debates. (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI 2013; RICHARDSON 2008). To add to existing literature that seeks to



address South African race relations we must go beyond the ethics of ubuntu. This is not in any way implying that ubuntu is no longer useful. Situating the idea of complementary ethics in relation to ubuntu will further create a mindset that does not understand relationality in terms of homogeneity or sameness. The focus is therefore to take the discourse on racial complementarity to under-explored practical considerations of the social, moral, and political themes associated with racial discrimination and race relations. This will become a contribution to the already existing strategy that seeks to address racial discrimination in South Africa. Nevertheless, it is one thing to desire change, it is another thing entirely to implement policies that are transformative in the talk or discourses on race relations in South Africa.

### *The complementary mindset*

Without mutual respect and the consciousness to look beyond racial differences the complementary mindset would be unattainable. Thus, what racial complementarity comes with is the shedding of biases and prejudices and the recognition of the value of different perspectives as part of human flourishing. It is a mindset that sees differences not as a limitation but as a drive towards transforming human situations. This is not to say that disagreements may not arise when we express our differences, how we interpret or act on these disagreements is what shows the strength of complementarity. For instance, the disagreement of opposed variables, like the different race groups, can create the platform for understanding people's perspectives and concerns at the level of mutual intelligibility. The moment a person or group of persons begin to absolutize their cultures or beliefs over and above others that kind of mindset certainly contradicts the complementary mindset. The complementary mindset should also be understood as involving a process of acceptance as well as the conscious rethinking and unlearning of absolutism, biases, and prejudices that limit the flourishing of difference. For instance within the South African context what hinders the complementary mindset is the fact that opposed variables (that is the different race groups) have remained opposed in a non-creative mode. Creative struggle, as one of the central ideas in conversational thinking, is a method of thinking that

promotes complementary relationships (relationships of mutual interdependence).

The method of conversational thinking provides ways of philosophizing that abhor the ‘winner takes it all’ mentality that characterizes absolutist mindsets. Thus, when conversational thinking is applied to the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa it would be to restore and foster the values of relationship, interdependence, interrelatedness between the different race groups. This is because the conversational method imbues us with a particular kind of mindset, that is, the complementary mindset, that works against the absolutizing of a race, worldview, culture, tradition, or even philosophy over and above that of others. If this pattern of reasoning is to become the matrix for engagements between the different race groups in South Africa, one can say that the journey towards ending essentialist understanding of race and race relations, which encourage discrimination, has begun.

As universal as the idea of relationship may be, a more robust understanding of relationship is needed for analyzing as well as formulating a method of philosophizing that best captures the complexities of racial discrimination in South African society. The implication of conversational thinking in responding to the South African problem of racial discrimination lies in the fact that the notion of difference can become the starting point that can birth a new concept of relationship. So, we see that without individual and cultural differences, the idea of *nmeke* or relationship as a crucial aspect of complementarity would be moot. This is because the idea of complementarity is best understood and projected when distinct variables are present, for these are the variables that must come together in a relationship. Three important features can be drawn from the method of conversational thinking, which can contribute towards addressing the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa. (1) Conversationalism emphasizes platforms for creative struggle; (2) conversationalism also emphasizes equal critical and creative interaction as the infrastructure that gives birth to new ideas; (3) transformative conversations thrive within the context of complementary relationships, without the fear of power dynamics and hegemonic presence. These relational values as outlined within the framework of conversational thinking will encourage the sort of relationship necessary for addressing problems of racial

discrimination in South Africa. The concurrent situations of racism, exclusion, segregation, and xenophobia that bedevils the South African society shows that there is a need for an alternative orientation that goes beyond stating the constitutive nature of our being through ubuntu to showing that there exist human differences that are meant not to limit but to strengthen human relationships at any level of human encounter.

What the above implies is that human difference can be multi-perspectival. However, these perspectives (our identity, culture, and values) do not become conceited, exclusive, polarized, and non-reconciliatory. Conversationalism is what creates a level field for complementary relationships and engagements. It is the aim of this engagement to deconstruct and reconstruct new forms of relationships that transcend the racial lines in South Africa. Furthermore, to address the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa feasible policies should be enacted to address structural and economic inequalities that sustain segregation and discrimination. It will take feasible policies to propel or encourage racial complementarity of any sort in an unequal society like South Africa. Another important point to note is that the idea of complementarity is not seeking to homogenize or create any form of racial assimilation as this would no longer be promoting complementarity because it is important that different race groups preserve their cultural identities. This is why I mentioned earlier that human differences do not or cannot limit human flourishing when guided by a complementary mindset. One must also admit that it will not be easy to achieve a level ground for conversations between the different race groups given the history of South Africa. Nonetheless, critical and creative contestations are required to address issues that may arise from power dynamics. One can argue that the issue of unequal power dynamics in race relations in South Africa exists because one ‘cultural bloc or people set the rules for racial engagements (whether epistemic, political or economic)’ as it was in Apartheid South Africa. The problem of racial discrimination can be understood from the backdrop of this assumed cultural superiority. When human relationships are built or established with this kind of mindset, it is almost impossible to avoid things like racial discrimination, inequality, and intolerance in these kinds of societies.

One can argue that the method or approach employed by the South African post-Apartheid government to put an end to racial inequality as well as to overturn the injustices of the past has not adequately addressed the problem because it lacks the method of critical conversations. The idea of a conversation should not be conceived “as an informal exchange between two or more interlocutors revolving around the core notion of ‘relationship’” (CHIMAKONAM & EGBAI 2019, 173). It should, however, be conceived as a rule-guided interaction that involves “reflection (a private activity) and expression of thoughts (a public activity) involving contestants and protestants from diverse cultures” (ibid). The implication of this claim for the problem of discrimination, segregation, and exclusion, in South Africa, is that a relationship of any kind is only possible if it involves an introspective reflection that allows the mind to accept the co-existence of different non-absolutist perspectives to co-exist. To address the injustices of the past presupposes reconciliation and reparation. However, if reconciliation is devoid of respect and recognition it is no reconciliation. Talk of reconciliation must therefore be tailored towards recognizing and respecting the different agents involved in the process. It is when reconciliation and reparation is done within a conversational and complementary framework that progress, with regards to addressing discrimination, can be made.

The conversational understanding of reconciliation is different from the idea of reconciliation that was spearheaded by the truth and reconciliation commission (TRC). The goal of the (TRC) was to create a platform, where victims of racial discrimination and injustices of the past could confront their oppressors and begin the process of reconciliation. It is this philosophy that stands as the underlying philosophy for democratic South Africa (SOUTH AFRICAN INTERIM CONSTITUTION 1993, 251). Whether Ubuntu has resolved the racial injustice and other forms of discrimination that still persists in today’s South Africa is a question whose answer is obvious – it has not (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI, 2013). To achieve reconciliation creative action that is, the goal to move beyond the hurt and pain of the past must be backed up with critical actions that is, evaluating the feasibility of transforming the structures and systems that sustains inequality and injustice. Thus, when critical reflections are backed up with creative

actions a new understanding of reconciliation will ensue. It may seem unlikely that a true conversation between the different race groups in South Africa can take place without some form of unintended expressions of biases. The problem of unintended biases can be challenged and addressed using the strategy of contestations and protestations, which is part of the method of conversational thinking.

Some scholars who have theorized on the problem of racism and race relation in South Africa use the framework of critical race theory (CRT). Mavis B. Mhlauli (n.d.n. 2015), for instance, recommends the unveiling of CRT to uncover the manifestations of racism in post-apartheid South Africa. Some scholars have also employed Mills's (1992) idea of racial contract as a theoretical framework to understand the Apartheid system in South Africa and its manifestations in racism and discrimination (see: MAVIS n.d.n. 2015).

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the method of conversational thinking as a theory in African philosophy. I explored its methodic implication for race relations in South Africa, discussed some of its principles, and showed its theoretic relevance in understanding as well as addressing the challenge of racial discrimination that has impacted race relations in South Africa. I discussed the idea of conversational thinking and how it can help resolve the problem of racial discrimination that stems from the legacies of Apartheid in South Africa. In doing so, I contend that it is through a transformed mindset that the notion of reconciliation and relationship can best be understood as a conversational engagement. I showed that in reaching a multi-perspectival understanding of a race-blind interaction between the different race groups in South Africa the target of race relations must engage as well as accommodate various cultural manifestations in forging a new path in deconstructing the idea of discrimination that besets the South African society. Finally, I conclude that the basis for understanding the idea of racial complementarity, and the creative struggle it entails, is to see beyond the enclaves of racial differences that encourage racial division but rather push for a relationship of mutual dependence.

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