

Comment & Analysis

Why is it hard to be black and 'middle class'?

It's not just a question of wealth, but of how people define themselves in relation to their community

SOCIAL MOBILITY
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We set out to explore what it means to be black and middle class in contemporary Gauteng, without developing a narrow and definite definition of either blackness or middle-classness.

We were interested in everyday experiences over abstract categories and in subjective meanings rather than objective measurements. We deliberately did not define these categories upfront so as not to exclude important dynamics and processes. The life histories we collected through semi-structured interviews were drawn not from a random sample but from people we'd known for some time and with whom we'd previously had discussions on this issue. For that reason, our sample was not representative in a statistical sense, but it did generate the sort of findings qualitative research is well geared for.

We had to make sense of the finding that all our research participants were strikingly reluctant to self-identify as being middle class. They did not regard the category "black" as a problem, but we engaged in long discussions about the category "middle class".

Analysing our data, we saw we had to confront not only the factual data about life trajectories obtained during these interviews but also stylistic data on how research participants engaged us in debates and negotiations about our use of the term "middle class". This dynamic, inherent in the research process — which quantitative research is unlikely to pick up — helped us make sense of this reluctance to self-identify as being black and middle class.

What we found confirms some findings in the existing literature, but also offers new topics for exploration.

First, we found that history matters in how our research participants make sense of their race, gender and class positions. The very category "black middle class" is conceivable only in relation to our country's history of racialised capitalism. No surprise there. The abstract relationships of race, class and gender, however, were brought to the fore in textured ways in the life histories.

The women spoke about how difficult it was under apartheid and in their communities for them to identify as belonging to a middle-class household, given the ways class and gender differences were underplayed at the time to create a united front against apartheid's racial oppression.

The men spoke about the impossibility under apartheid of even imagining a national (multiracial) middle class, given the discrepancies between remuneration for work and lifestyles. What economists call "asset deficit" among the black middle class was experienced by our interlocutors as deeply personal and, at times, painful, though this experience was also dotted with narratives of unselfish mothers "building a home", having to isolate oneself from demanding kin, and the trauma of being blacklisted by a credit bureau.

Second, we found that subjective notions of class are experienced and articulated situationally, contextually and relationally. That is, in different social situations and contexts different aspects of one's identity — such as being black and middle class — may be emphasised or underplayed. In relation to a certain group, you may stress being black, yet in relation to another group you may stress your social class.

Recent research by Mosa Phadi, Claire Ceruti and others shows that Sowetans talk about class in multiple ways and in a strikingly relational manner. "Middle class" is often seen as an "in the middle" position in a social hierarchy, between those on top (the rich) and those on the bottom (the poor). Our participants used the label "black middle class" in ways that spoke to the relationships among different social strata. The idea of talking about the black middle class as a "thing in itself" is not common; it is spoken of in relational terms, in what it excludes or differentiates itself from, what it is similar to or dissimilar from.

In some contexts, for example, calling yourself middle class would be seen as positive because of the stigma attached to being poor as well as the stigma attached to being rich (and the aspiration for social mobility expressed in the phrase "wanting to be white"). Situating yourself in the middle of a hierarchy allows you to escape blame and stigma. One respondent became conscious of her class position at primary school when, one day, she mentioned to schoolmates something about her "room at home". Their surprised faces and subsequent discussions made her realise that she was the only one with a room of her own.

Another interlocutor said she realised she was "middle class" in her residential community, but once she arrived in Johannesburg to study at a university she realised she was not middle class in the way she had understood it. An entirely different grammar of class and race dynamics structured everyday life as a black



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

student in Johannesburg. Here, access to wealth and resources was determined by race, so being black effectively meant being banned from the "middle class". The class difference emphasised during her childhood was now taken over by race differences; she started seeing more similarities between herself and fellow black residents of the city.

Third, we met significant resistance to being labelled "black middle class". Such labelling is not entirely new in communities, but the dominant public labels are no longer the outcome of everyday negotiations among social and residential communities — as they had been, for our interlocutors, in their coming of age. Their notions of class were the product of negotiations in social spaces: churches, shebeens, political organisations and on the street.

Thus they pointed to the fact that, even as a rich man in Soweto under apartheid, entrepreneur Richard Maponya lived in Soweto and participated in the same social fields

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as his customers. There was social distance between classes, but apartheid meant intense social dynamics in black residential communities, so even the witty, pejorative labels for the newly rich were the product of social negotiations between people of different classes.

Shame, stigma and envy were all responses to social processes. This no longer seems to be the case. Entities such as research institutions and marketing consultants now produce new labels. An important part of the resistance to such labels is that people do not want to identify with a label or category defined outside themselves and outside their social world. Their resistance interrogates the labelling: What is the label for? What will they use it for? How will our identification with this label impact on us?

Hence the healthy suspicion of, and resistance to, marketing labels such as "black diamond". Being defined by anonymous and possibly anti-social forces produces a sense of nostalgia for a time when "we could class ourselves". This is not a longing for apartheid, but for a time when, despite racial oppression, black people could identify the social actors with an impact on their lives.

This brings us to the fourth and last point: the importance of debt in the making of the middle class, as well as subjective experiences of this process. We now live in an era when

we are not only defined by anonymous structures, our respondents told us, but also by our levels of debt.

On one level, today, access to debt makes entry to the middle class possible; it socialises our interlocutors into the abstract entity of a national, anonymous middle class. When talking about debt and indebtedness the heterogeneity of the black middle class is evident.

Those who grew up in middle-class households under apartheid did not rely on debt to reach their social positions, unlike the bulk of the contemporary black middle class. When Maponya extended credit to his customers, who were also neighbours and relatives, this was not only an economic relationship. Social ties also linked him as shop owner to his clientele.

Credit and debt relations today are no longer relations between people but relations between people and faceless institutions. They discipline us into the anonymous structures of national capitalism at the very moment in world history when national capitalism and national middle classes seem to have become categories that block an understanding of global capitalism.

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