The intersection of race and class in the South African university: Student experiences

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to make a contribution to the discussion on the sociological features of higher education and the significant ways in which it comes to produce a particular version of the racial experience. While work has appeared which has begun to comment on fragmentation of identity in South African higher education there is insufficient attention paid to the ways in which identity-making takes place. What this article will do is to focus on the racial as a resource which is brought into contact with the institution and to suggest what the outlines of this coming together are in the South African setting. It does not, indeed cannot, develop a deep discussion, as in the classic identity-formation literature, about subject formation – who, for example, is attributing what to whom and under what power conditions. What it seeks to do, in a limited way, is point to interesting new trends in how race is being experienced by South African students and particularly by black students. What does the racial experience look like for them? When students invoke race what is it that they are talking about?

INTRODUCTION
Issues of race remain at the forefront of education in South Africa. Despite the abolition of formal apartheid in 1994, race and racial discrimination continue to be issues which trouble the delivery and experience of higher education (see for example, Brown 2006; Steyn and De Villiers 2006; Council for Higher Education (CHE) 2004). How these phenomena, however, take shape and have come to impact the university, college and the terrain of higher education are insufficiently interrogated. While higher education shares with other levels of education the discriminatory history and impact of the country’s social, political and economic environment, it does, however, present itself as a specific and distinct arena. This distinctiveness has to be understood through a recognition of the particular ways in which the engagement of the subject with deep bodies of knowledge has figuring or shaping possibilities. This discussion has been aired well in recent texts such as those of Attewell and Lavin (2007) which make the point about the specific ways in which higher education participation changes the lives of students. While the experience of race in the primary and secondary school setting might provide a relatively accurate
reflection of the everyday nature of race (it does as a social construct change course and shape over time), there are features of the higher education experience which place race into a different relationship with the same factors that operate in other everyday experiences. Key, for the purposes of this article, therefore, is the idea that individual identity and the development of autonomy is a much more deliberate, and indeed prized, objective of the higher education process than it is in other areas of everyday life (see Wardekker 1995; Renn 2004; Walker 2006, 24). Of particular significance, in terms of this, is the idea that social class, expressed in the form of individual achievement, configures the race experience in distinctive kinds of ways.

Important in developing this line of thought is making the point that race as an experience, and even the ways in which it might be explained, as a result of the different forms racism might take, is never the same in two different contexts or in different time-periods. This is a key argument in the work of Omi and Winant (1986). One comes to see in this work how the contingent relationship of race with other factors continues to produce new social configurations in which race and its surrounding social factors change character regularly. In these relationships race and its related social factors might exist in a state of domination of one over the other, occlusion or over-determination. It is rare that these factors act in a symmetrical way.

Around the world, and there are many studies which deal with this, the issues of race and gender in higher education have proved to be particularly vexing (see Di Leo 2003). In the current South African period, gender remains a critical factor in determining the shape and profile of the professoriate (see De la Rey 1999), and even the forms of identity developed by individuals (Perumal 2004). Equally important, and perhaps more so in terms of understanding the nature of the higher education experience as a whole, is social class. Given the elite character of higher education (its selectivity in terms of who it allows in and who out) social class has come to produce new and interesting racial demographics but, more pertinently for this work, also new expressions of what race might mean for individuals within the system.

Against the backdrop of the discussion above, an important objective of this article is to make a contribution to the discussion on the sociological features of higher education and the significant ways in which it comes to produce a particular version of the racial experience. While work has appeared which has begun to comment on fragmentation of identity in South African higher education (see particularly the work of Liebowitz et al. 2006), there is insufficient attention paid to the ways in which identity-making takes place. An important attempt at remediating this shortcoming is available in the innovative work of Hoadley (2006) in which she shows how the relationship between home and school comes together to produce particular identity outcomes. In that paper she focuses on the pedagogical alignment of home and school and the ease/challenge produced by it. What this article will do somewhat differently and in an exploratory way is to focus on the racial as a resource which is brought into contact with the institution and to suggest what the outlines of this coming together are in the South African setting. It does not, indeed cannot, develop a deep discussion, as in the classic identity-formation literature, about subject formation –
who, for example, is attributing what to whom and under what power conditions. What it seeks to do, in a limited way, is point to interesting new trends in how race is being experienced by South African students and particularly by black students. What does the racial experience look like for them? When students invoke race what is it that they are talking about?

The argument that the article makes is that the experience of race takes on what might be called a sublimated form in the university. It draws on the theoretical proposition stated above of how race works in conjunction with other factors, most formatively amongst young people – undergraduates are the focus of this work – to produce a weakened sense of race in the South African university. Eminent in the making of this sublimation is the factor of social class. The synthesis of work at one’s disposal shows how considerations of social class work race (and indeed the reverse can be described too) and particularly the implicit cultural practices that inhere in the class transactions that take place in the university into an occluded terrain of engagement in the university. The upshot of this, and this talks to the policy significance of work such as this, is that it is extremely difficult to engage the institution as a site of racial production because race never presents itself as an autonomous phenomenon, or in a form which is sufficiently self-referential to make it an object of inspection by itself. Locating it in the workings of the higher education institution is difficult because while it can be read in institutional narratives as a demographic cipher, what its content is, beyond, of course, the form it takes in the most egregious situations where racism is blatant and unsophisticated, is hard to recognize and name. So, for example, both achievement and failure, as they manifest themselves in individuals’ lives and in the experience of groups of people, is hard to account for in strictly racial terms. In this accounting of a relationship, while the institutional character of a university is key, and in some institutions stronger or weaker forms of racism might be apparent, not unimportant is the agency of individuals, and principally black people in this instance, in determining the nature of the sublimation of race. Making sense of this relationship is difficult and is often interpreted through proxy devices, such as language use, the relevance of their home background, former school and so on. How one comes to engage with the substance of people’s experiences in the university remains, therefore, a challenge and particularly so for the discussion of affirmative action which tends to work with essentialized understandings of what race is all about.

The article is divided into three sections. The first provides a summary background of the development of higher education in the last twelve years and pays primary attention to the evolving demographic landscape in the sector. The article has access to a number of overview analyses that have been carried out in the last five years. This section is used essentially to foreground the issues that arise in looking at how race as a construct develops in higher education. The second section is devoted to an analysis of the major studies that have been conducted in the field around the student experience, also in the last five years. These studies consist of small-scale case-studies of student attitudes and experiences in particular areas of the university
and its life, such as experiences in disciplines or the residences, institutional climate surveys, and a range of both quantitative and qualitative work with black students in a small number of universities. The final section of the article returns to the issues of race and class and attempts to show what their inter-relationship produces in the new South African higher education arena.

SECTION ONE: THE CHANGING NATURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER 1994

The higher education sector in the country has been the subject of intense policy and academic review over the last twelve years (see, inter alia, Bunting 1994; National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) Report 1996; Department of Education 1996; Centre for Higher Education (CHE) 2000; Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1997; Beckham 2000; Cloete, Muller, Makgoba and Ekong 1997; Cooper and Subotzky 2001; Cloete and Bunting 2000; Cloete, Bunting and Bunting 2002; Thaver 2002; Mji 2002; Imenda, Kongolo and Grewal 2002; Taylor and Harris 2002; Cloete, Pillay, Badat and Mehojo 2004; CHE 2004; Bundy 2006; Steyn and De Villiers 2006). Not unexpectedly, in the context of South Africa’s development challenges, a great deal of attention has been focused on issues of capacity in higher education; the capacity, on the one hand, of the system to yield a skilled and trained workforce able to support the economy’s needs, and the capacity, on the other, for it to increase the largely untapped pool of black school-leavers in the system. While the focus on capacity in higher education takes its starting-point from the economy, it is the social character of the country and its unequal and discriminatory past that provides the discussion around higher education and its future with its key strategic challenges. These challenges crystallize, as the argument is made in the conclusion of this section, into a distinct set of issues, which are then made the subject of analysis for Section Two of the article.

The character of higher education in South Africa takes its form from colonialism and apartheid (Marcum 1982). In the pre-apartheid era admission to the small number of universities and colleges was informally determined by race. Under pressure from a prominent city councillor, the University of Cape Town, for example, admitted its first person of colour in 1916 (see Adhikari 1996). Women had also only been allowed entry not many decades before (see Phillips 1997). When the apartheid government came into power in 1948 it formalized race-based participation in higher education. It passed the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 (see Badsha 2000, 12) which ‘formally restricted entry to universities according to race and paved the way for racially and ethnically based universities to serve the needs of the “separate development” policy at the core of apartheid ideology’. In the course of its more than forty year rule, the apartheid-government institutionalized a higher education landscape consisting of 21 universities, 15 technikons and approximately 140 single-discipline and vocational colleges serving the fields of nursing, education and agriculture, all of which were structured along racial lines of admission and tuition.
Historically-black institutions, in addition to being managed as racially separate institutions, also experienced other challenges. Located in marginalized areas, they drew their students from communities that were themselves enmeshed in social and economic disadvantage. As Badsha (2000, 12) explains, this was ‘the origin of the terms “historically black” (HBI) and “historically white” (HWI) to describe higher education institutions in South Africa’. The impact of this situation was complex. In 1993 while participation rates of the white community for universities and technikons were 69,7 per cent, for African and coloured communities they were 12,1 per cent and 13 per cent respectively (Cloete and Bunting c1999, 15). Of the 473,000 students registered in these institutions, 191,000 were African, 223,000 white and the rest coloured and Indian (ibid, 18). Interestingly, in addition, Badsha (2000, 17) suggests, the majority of the African students would have been first-generation students, especially those at HBIs.

The discriminatory attitude of the apartheid government notwithstanding, historically black institutions experienced a growth in enrolments during the late 1980s and early 1990s (ibid). These institutions, however, lacked the capacity to cope with this increase in numbers and the particular difficulties their under-prepared students brought with them. They tended, as a result, to channel the increased enrolments towards fields such as the arts, humanities and education. In 1993, for instance, Badsha (ibid) explains, only about 20 per cent of students registered for courses in the natural sciences were enrolled at HBIs.

An important factor in accounting for the character of higher education at the end of the apartheid era was the fact that the universities and technikons, especially the HBIs, had become deeply embroiled in the struggle against apartheid. With militant student organizations boycotting classes and aligning themselves with protests in their communities (see Badat 1999), the field of higher education was in a state of turbulence. Learning came to an abrupt end for many young people during this time. Many dropped out never to return. A number returned but struggled academically. In the midst of this, not unsurprisingly, many institutions fell into debt with their numbers fluctuating and so yielding irregular subsidies from the state. Students also, in many instances, refused to pay fees.

The higher education sector that the new government inherited in 1994 was, as a result of these challenges, wracked with difficulties. Public confidence in the sector was low (CHE 2004, 15). How government was to proceed was unclear. It had essentially come to the conclusion that the sector was disadvantaged by institutions ‘that essentially (remained) fixed in their apartheid past. Second, there was concern about the quality of output …. Third, numerous inefficiencies plagued the system’ (ibid). It was against this backdrop that the new government came to the conclusion that it had to (i) restore public confidence in higher education by steering it towards greater efficiency, and (ii) transform the sector to deal with the inequities surrounding access, participation and success and to ‘radically (reduce) deeply-embedded inequalities between HEIs …’ (ibid). A National Commission on
Higher Education (NCHE) was appointed in 1994 to make proposals as to how the sector could be transformed.

The NCHE (1996) submitted its report in 1996, *A Framework for Transformation*. Key proposals related to massification, responsiveness of higher education to its social context and increased institutional co-operation. This report was followed by a White Paper (1997) and a Higher Education Act (1997) in which the principles of equity and redress, democratization, effectiveness and efficiency, *inter alia*, were stressed. For the record, these policy pronouncements were followed in 1999 with a Centre for Higher Education (CHE) report commissioned by the Minister of Education on the size and shape of the sector. This report provided the framework for the restructuring of the sector. In terms of it, a number of institutions were closed, merged and/or re-organized (see Jansen 2002).

How institutions have responded to the equity and redress requirements of the new policy has been complex. As far as the government has been concerned (see CHE 2004, 33), however, the challenges of transformation have not been resolved satisfactorily.

This dissatisfaction is evident in the field itself where key problems remain. Not least amongst the difficulties has been the obdurately white and male character of the academic staff in the sector (see Cooper and Subotzky 2000; Thaver 2003; CHE 2004; Khan 2005), and the un-problematized nature of its curriculum (See Seephe 2000; Moll 2004; Slominsky and Shalem 2006). Even the much-trumpeted success in the transformation of enrolments patterns in the sector has elicited serious comment (CHE 2004, 82; Badat 2004). While headcount trends (see Cooper and Subotzky 2001, 31) showed a dramatic increase in the enrolments of African students at HWIs and especially at Historically White Afrikaans Universities (HAUs) where African enrolments (31,000) by 1998 were approaching those in the six African HDIs (37,000), interestingly, much of this enrolment was concentrated around lower under-graduate teacher qualifications, which were attracting large numbers of females, producing what they called a ‘skewed revolution’. The CHE (op.cit), reflecting on ten years of democracy in relation to higher education came to the following conclusion: ‘In terms of the overall South African demography Africans form 79% of the population, coloureds 9%, Indians 2% and whites 10%. In this regard, Africans are still under-represented in higher education and especially under-represented at universities (48%). Whites remain strongly represented in all institutional types, especially in the universities (37%).’

The work of Cloete and Bunting (2000, 30–31), also showed that while the total number of black graduates produced by universities in 1998 as compared to 1995 had increased by 3,900 or 22 per cent, these increases did not indicate an improvement in success rates of students. Between 1995 and 1998 throughput rates for African students increased from 7 per cent to 8 per cent in relation to their total enrolments for those years, while those of white students went up from 24 per cent to 25 per cent.

In analyzing the enrolment trends Cooper and Subotzky came to the conclusion that ‘neither the steering effect of government policies, nor the individual institutional
policies and practices, have in themselves created the necessary conditions for these changes’ (ibid, 231). Instead, they suggest, the main factors ‘driving the student revolution include: the middle-class aspirations of black students and their families …’ (ibid). Looking at the differential experience of African and white students, Cloete and Bunting (2000, 31) argue that ‘many of the legacies of apartheid are still firmly in place’.

Cooper and Subotzky and Cloete and Bunting’s conclusions are important in bringing this section to a close. They point to historical and sociological developments in the wider society, and the growth of the black middle class here is a central development, that play themselves out in interesting ways in higher education. It is to a discussion of these developments that the next section turns.

SECTION TWO: THE UNDER-GRADUATE EXPERIENCE

The literature reviewing the nature of the recent under-graduate experience in South African universities has eloquently pointed to the persistent racism experienced by black undergraduates. Makobela’s (2001) study of students at the University of Stellenbosch, a prestigious historically Afrikaans university in the Western Cape, Woods’ (2001) work on black students at the University of the Witwatersrand, also a leading historically English-speaking Johannesburg-based university and Jansen’s interaction with students at the University of Pretoria (2004), one of the country’s largest and most important historically Afrikaans universities, provide important descriptions of the discriminatory experiences black students report they are going through. Institutional Climate surveys, some of which are used below, carried out in a number of institutions, and independent attitudinal surveys of student dispositions, attitudes and aspirations conducted in recent years also confirm that there are deep problems virtually everywhere within the system (see UCT 2004; UCT 2005; University of the Witwatersrand 2002; Cooper 2005; Graaff 2006; Kapp and Bangeni 2006; Daniels and Richards 2006; Liebowitz et al. 2005). Jansen (2004, 3) says that ‘undergraduate students at former white universities are deeply alienated from each other’. These problems, according to the chairperson of the South African Students Congress (SASCO), begin before admission to the university (The Cape Argus 22 January 2007, 4). He averred that matriculants (students who had passed their Grade 12 school examinations) ‘would be rejected on the basis of their skin colour …. Preference is given to white learners first, then coloured and then black at the bottom.’

There is, also, a recognition on the part of many universities that racist behaviour persists in their institutions. In October 2006 the University of the Western Cape, a historically disadvantaged institution originally established for people classified coloured, established a commission of enquiry into allegations of racism in its Law Faculty (The Cape Argus Tuesday 31October 2006, 6).

Clearly, as the detailed testimony provided by Woods (2001, 103) shows, the perception of young black students is that they are the subjects of racism and that this racism has affected their social, cultural and academic well-being. This racism,
they explain, is sometimes overt but is often exemplified by what black students perceive as intolerance on the part of white students and lecturers for their languages and cultures. Makobela’s (2001, 68) subjects also expressed intense frustration and feelings of alienation. Jansen’s (2004, 5) comment about the post-apartheid university is that it has desegregated but not integrated.

The problem of racism is, therefore, real. But reading this testimony at a surface level obscures interesting and important ways in which black students, in their increasing numbers, are approaching and settling into the academy. Significantly, as in the United States, even though students experience racism in the formerly white universities, they are choosing these institutions over those that had been especially established for them during apartheid (Imenda, Kongolo and Grewal 2002; Sedumedi 2002). Required, therefore, is an analysis which goes beyond these symptomatic statements to explore how young black students, in particular, are thinking through their experience.

An important point of departure in developing this analysis is recognizing the apparently contradictory statements students make in institutional climate surveys (see UCT 2004; UCT 2005). While surveys such as these paint a vivid picture of the racial frustrations of students, there is an intense desire on the part of the students, reflecting what Cooper and Subotzky (2002) call middle-class aspiration, to feel at home, echoing Lionel Thaver’s (2006) provocative critique of the cultural estrangement experienced by black students in white institutions. Mabokela’s work has a student commenting on his feeling of social loss at the University of Stellenbosch. He says, ‘… just look at Stellenbosch (the town) – it’s White, White, White. Where do I go to socialize? I can’t go to Kyamandi (the local Black township); those people look at us like we are strangers’ (Makobela 2001, 69). There is an intense desire, on the part of the students to fit in and be accepted.

One must not underestimate the weight and substance of students’ racial grievances. The pain with which they are conveyed is deep. In the UCT (2004) survey for example, the evidence provided to the researchers made it clear, as Zimitri Erasmus a sociologist who had conducted a separate study at the University’s Health Sciences Faculty in 2003, commented, that ‘black students are having to do all the racial work in the institution’. The full burden of the racial experience – decoding the social spaces in which they found themselves – was being placed on black students. White students, black students felt, were not required to do any reflecting on their situation. Their cultural orientations meshed perfectly with those of the institution. Black students felt that they were being discriminated against because of their language by faculty members. One said ‘… there was like a four-page scenario that you had to read so that you can actually get to the question. By the time I was on page 2, I didn’t actually know what I had read on page 1, because the words they are using are just too much, … even the other lecturer, agreed that it was ridiculous’ (UCT 2004, 20). Another said that she had noticed ‘… with certain lecturers, Because we were all Black, she … made you feel very stupid, that you are coming from a disadvantaged background, so … you don’t know anything’ (ibid, 22). While there certainly were
students who commended their lecturers for their sensitivity, there were others who
overwhelmed by the scale of that which their lecturers took for granted: ‘… you’re
so scared cause they gonna laugh at you if your English is not good and you end
up just sitting there and not asking anything, sometimes it make me feel as if I am
suffocating’ (ibid, 23). Feelings of inferiority and a lack of worth were pervasive
amongst students in academic development programmes.

Black students frequently, also, spoke of their concerns about the segregation that
took place at the University of Cape Town – that which was formal and virtually
official on the one hand, and that, on the other, which was informal. Refectories,
residences and even certain courses were coded by colour. A student commented
on the segregation she had experienced at a restaurant on the campus: ‘… There’s
Nescafe Coffee Shop. It used to be White dominated, I swear to God, if you go there,
they look at you funny and you gonna feel like I don’t belong here. I shouldn’t even
be here … even the staff who are serving you are a bit concerned about “what you are
black, why are you here?” Two, even the residences, like Liesbeck (sic), has Black
students only…’ (ibid. 30). While there is testimony which counterbalances this
experience of discrimination, it is clear in the statements of white students that they
struggle to comprehend what black students go through at the university. Illustrating
this, as the data gathered by Cooper (2005) shows, there is resentment on the part
of many white students for what is perceived to be the unfair advantage enjoyed by
black students in the allocation of places in the university and on the job market.

The nature of the evidence powerfully conveys the difficulties black students
experience at the university. Also in the evidence, however, is the pervasive refrain
of ‘making it’, of surviving and even succeeding in the institution. It is in this
desire – the encounter of students’ aspirations to improve themselves – that race is
significantly modified from an experience of helplessness and apathy to what one
might understand as the mobilization of agency. Important in understanding this
experience is recognizing the intersection of two factors – one of which is externally
shaped and the other internally. Students, in having to think about their racial identities
move into a space in which their externally framed drives and aspirations – their
middle-class dreams – are brought into a relationship with the character-forming
influences inherent in higher education practice to develop complex attitudes to
themselves, their fellow students and mentors and the institutions in which they find
themselves. Both of these forces, of course, are complex. Neither is in and of itself
innocent.

With respect to the external, evocative in the testimony of students at UCT, and
there are similar features to be found in the University of Witwatersrand (2002) data,
is the yearning students have for an improvement in their status. Extracts from the
UCT (2004) Institutional Climate Survey show the nature of this yearning:

- Why UCT? Yeah, I was the best so you go to the best (black male).
- Everybody goes to UCT as it is where standard of learning is highest (black
  female)
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- You should see how people’s eyes widen when I pull out my student card when going to clubs (Indian female).
- I think that people back home in Durban are impressed by the fact that I am a UCT student (Indian male).
- Being one of the leading African institutions; the graduates that come out of this university especially the commerce graduates are generally held in high regard in the business community (Indian male).

Influential also is the fact that students stand a good chance of receiving financial aid.

The very fact that they are at university makes some students think twice about how they might present themselves. Having been accepted into the institution induces ambivalent feelings amongst students. Many continue to be angry, as the evidence above makes clear. But there is also a sense in which students seek to move beyond their racial identities to foregrounding their class standing. A black male at UCT made the following comment,

We should not use the fact that we are black for under-performing. UCT has got very high standards. If you want to get 50 and get to Honours then why don’t you go to XYZ University (original name excised)? You are welcome to do that. UCT has always had high standards. I mean that is why we are here, because of the prestige ….

So guys who are complaining about the standards, and that they are failing, then they must go to the previously black institutions. (UCT 2004, 19).

Somewhat crude as these comments are, they reflect sociologically what Jansen (2004, 4) has described as ‘judgements based on self-interest’. This element of influence on their experience of race at the university has distinctly negative connotations. Black students continue to regard themselves as blacks, but as a special kind of black. An acute reading of the data collected by Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson and Strauss (2003, 114) shows how this self-perception could be interpreted. Concluding from a substantial survey of black and white student at UCT, they say that

The absence of significant differences between white and black African students on the academic adjustment scale was perplexing in the light of the evidence that the average grade marks of the black participants were disproportionately lower than those of white students. It appears that while black African students feel satisfied with their academic adjustment, they are not performing as well as their white peers.

Why this should be so, they suggest is complex: ‘… black African students may equate low passing grades with academic success’ (ibid). While a great deal more work needs to be done here, it may be that it is the external factor, the class elevation factor in which students are reading their experience against their social histories, or their previous lives that might be salient here. The significance of this for how race is interpreted is profound. It demonstrates the point about how the homogeneous category of black is recomposed in the process of interaction with other factors.
But even this reading is insufficient because, as Hoadley (2006) suggests, making this identity choice is surrounded by feelings of anxiety. Students are aware of the criticism that their choice of going to a privileged university will elicit (see Hoadley 2007, 12). They become conscious of their agency and the ‘danger’ of self-alienation from their communities and their histories which the mobilization of this agency can produce.

However, as the work of Cooper (2005), Kapp and Bangeni (2006) and Graaff (2006) show, there are dimensions of the internal factor that can considerably moderate the self-interest that the external factor might produce. This arises, as Graaff (2006, 1) explains, where academic courses help students to think beyond the binary and categorical forms of everyday knowledge to what he describes as the process of ‘relativiz(ing) opinions which see themselves as unique and absolute by comparing them with equivalent cultural phenomena in other times and other societies’. The possibility offered by the academic experience, and of course, it is not experienced by everybody in the same way, is that of self-transformation when, as he says borrowing from Fanon, self-negation, depression and stasis changes to initiative, optimism and combativeness: ‘It is not yet that point of empathy where a previous victim can now see the seductiveness of oppression. But it is a crucial moment where self-blame changes to anger, and where helplessness changes to action’ (ibid, 7). Putting it more sociologically and drawing on education theory, Cooper makes the point that ‘faculty specific “communities of practice” … make a major impact on the way race and gender play out in the classroom’. He uses examples of incidents in medicine and the social sciences to show how the subject matter under discussion and study modulates the use students make of prior experience such as racial and social identity. Students emerge out of these experiences with optimistic and positive self-understandings.

All students of course, and this is well-known, irrespective of their backgrounds, have the privilege of this possibility of ‘self-construction’ in the university. It takes many forms. In the South African context, the impact it has on race is important to highlight. Jansen (2004, 5), for example, describes the interesting process of conversion that white female students go through on the campus of the University of Pretoria. They develop friendships across colour lines that are durable and robust. For black students, however, and especially those who go to formerly white universities, the experience has the potential to grow their confidence, as it does for other students, but it also unsettles their perceptions of their racial identities. This sentiment was expressed strongly in the UCT survey (2004) and also in the Liebowitz et al. (2005, 33) survey conducted at the University of Stellenbosch. A senior student at the university whom they described as having been deeply engaged in matters of identity negotiation at the university commented:

I’ve started looking at diversity with greater depth … and the funny thing is, when you sit and look at people you just assume that they’re alike, but even in homogeneous
groups you’ll find people from completely different backgrounds and they view the world differently.

A first year student tells Kapp and Bangeni (2006) in response to their questions about how they negotiate their identities in relation to their academic disciplines: ‘You keep on debating because there’s no answer. They say they don’t look at the outcome, but in a way you are because you are using education as a means to go’. Another, a third year student, says ‘I have grown to realize through what I have been taught about God, females and males, [that] the world is not necessarily what it is and that what I believe in is not necessarily true or wrong – not everything is black and white …. I have learnt that human beings are not passive; they question things, its roots and how things become universally accepted.’

The identities that students came with into the university change. There are, needless to say, many where the negative coming together of the external and the internal produces a deep sense of alienation from their communities. One student at UCT told Hoadley (2006) that she ‘wasn’t gonna stay at home and be like the rest of the people around that place’. Another tells Liebowitz et al. (2006) at US that ‘the other problem I have is my family. It’s difficult even at this stage to sort of communicate and socialize with them because I’ve outgrown them in every possible way and when I do communicate with them I almost have to pretend or be someone else simply because they are telling you “you want to be white” ….‘

More positively, there are students who adapt positively to how they fit into the institution and hold on to their identities in a way which affirms their pasts and their futures. A number of students in the UCT (2004) and US (2005) studies talk of how their lives have changed and how they have come to learn to live with others around them. Their self-conceptions are strong. There are also students who go through deep transformations of their self-identities. A student in Graaff’s (2006, 7–8) study, Linda, holds on to her coloured identity, but refuses the facile ways in which it is transacted in one of her classes:

I put up my hand (in one of the lectures) and said “Um, I’m sorry, I don’t like the use of the word, coloured, in class”, and he was like, “But, but, but … we use it all the time”. And I said, “Then, no, you should change it, this is the place where you change words. A university changes words.” And then afterwards he was so scared. Every time he used the word … he searched me out. So this is what university has done for me.

For others students, the changes are less extreme. They settle into the academic identity of their discipline, as one student (whose race is not described) in Kapp and Bangeni’s (2006) work who says ‘… each day I find more and more evidence within myself that I am at that point where I moved from being in my discipline, to where I am my discipline. This is evident in my speech, thought, and ways I approach certain things, whether in academic or formal setting.’
SECTION THREE: CONCLUSION

In bringing this work to a conclusion, it needs to be acknowledged that government concerns about the lack of transformation in higher education are not misplaced. As this article has, hopefully, shown, racism remains a problem in many institutions in South Africa. A symptomatic reading of this problem, however, only provides one with a partial understanding of its dynamics. The field of higher education is constituted as a space of intense sociological complexity. Belying this complexity, and so allowing an engagement with the field in a limited way, is a passing resemblance, with respect to issues of race, of the terrain to the everyday. The forms and much of the substance of the everyday experience of race – expressed as racism and the ancillary feelings of superiority and inferiority that go with it – are present as teaching and learning takes place. But the character of the university, it needs to be recognized, produces particular identity outcomes, particularly amongst people who have existed on the margins of privilege who work with their identities and have their identities worked upon in a range of interesting ways.

Important in understanding the space of the South African university is coming to terms with how agency factors, what was described in this article as the external and the internal, have the potential to work on the phenomenon of race in particular kinds of ways. What they do is to reconstitute it. One sees how the desire for social mobility creates forces that often, not always it is acknowledged, given how much racism forces people into narrow understandings of their racial identities, have the effect of weakening the identification of young students with their home backgrounds. There are students who reject ‘home’ as it is embodied in the lives of their parents. But, more significantly, there are many, with the assistance of home, who choose to move on from where home was. This is a profoundly complex social phenomenon because it cannot easily present itself in the recognized language of race. It is rendered even more complex in the socializing and disciplinary context of the insider-languages they learn as social scientists, engineers, medical doctors and so on. The identities they develop continue to be raced, but in an attenuated form. Important, therefore, in working with the available evidence, is coming to terms with the extent to which young people reach for the status of the university or the discipline into which they go in explaining who they are. One sees in this reaching for the status which is embodied in the university a sublimation of their racial identities and an emphasis on the new social class into which they are moving.

How these developments are worked with in the changing policy environment of higher education is important to recognize. While there undoubtedly remain many black people for whom race continues to be pivotal, the important phenomenon of the weakened race identity and the stronger allegiance to status must be taken into consideration, especially in the context of discourses of affirmative action which work primarily around relatively stable and fixed notions of race.
NOTES
1. This article is based on research which was commissioned by a joint project of the Universities of Cape Town and Michigan. Elements of the article appear in a paper for this project entitled “Race and Class in the South African Higher Education Sector: A focus on the Undergraduate experience”.
2. Work of this nature, drawing from the American, South African and Brazilian settings, inter alia, would be very important and needs to be encouraged. While there have been studies that have been undertaken of these settings, the specific sociology of the higher education sector as a site for the production of race has not been systematically undertaken.
3. As a social construct it always is in a proximate relationship to other factors in society and takes its character from the very specific ways in which these factors inter-relate with it. It is, as a consequence, not stable and fixed (see Omi and Winant 1986).
4. Walker refers to interesting work in her paper on this very subject (Walker 2006).
5. Work of this nature, drawing from the American, South African and Brazilian settings, inter alia, would be very important and needs to be encouraged. While there have been studies that have been undertaken of these settings, the specific sociology of the higher education sector as a site for the production of race has not been systematically undertaken.
6. While racism, to emphasize a point, is the animating force in people’s relationships, it is the effect on their self-perceptions that this article particularly seeks to focus on. The argument the article makes is that the historical legacy of South Africa remains deeply influential in shaping relationships between South Africans of different backgrounds and also their perceptions of themselves and each other. At the same time, this legacy, as it is present in people’s heads, comes face-to-face with current social and economic realities in the country. Racism, as a result, is not the same animal it was during apartheid. It has to take new forms. The ways in which people come to see themselves, in this shifting human laboratory, are, consequently, profoundly complex. The category of black has a different meaning to that which it would have outside of the academy.

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