Investigating ‘race’ and social cohesion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

R. Pattman
University of KwaZulu-Natal
South Africa
e-mail: pattman@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract
In the light of the notorious video made by white students at the University of Free State (UFS) in which black middle aged cleaners were subjected to forms of degradation in a mock initiation ceremony (which included being given food mixed with urine) the Minister of Education authorised an investigation on social cohesion in universities. The Soudien report which followed from this questioned the transformative role of universities, noting that ‘racism and sexism’ were ‘pervasive’ in these. I take the Soudien report as a springboard for further investigative research on race (and gender) in universities, and, focusing on the University of KwaZulu-Natal, discuss principles and concerns which ought in my view to inform such research. I argue that part of the investigation should involve participatory research with students at the university and also with learners in the feeder schools in the Durban area, and try to illustrate the importance of doing this by taking examples of research with students and learners in these institutions. I address some of the epistemological and ethical problems arising from doing this kind of research, (notably how such research may be implicated in producing the very categories it seeks to investigate). The article walks a tightrope between two influential and opposite positions, one which suggests there is nothing to investigate and the other which already starts from the position that ‘race’ is an important category which determines students’ lives, identities and relations. The significance of race, I argue, needs to be explored not assumed, and other factors such as gender and class need to be considered (as I illustrate in this article) as possible sources of identification and dimensions of power along and in conjunction with race.

INTRODUCTION
In 2007 some white students at the University of Free State (UFS) made a video showing black middle aged cleaners being subjected to forms of degradation in a mock initiation ceremony (which included being given food mixed with urine). The video was made as an attack on the university’s attempt (after years of inaction) to introduce a few black students into what had been all white residences. When this was discovered questions were raised about why young people with no memories of living under apartheid could act in such blatantly racist ways. An investigation on ‘social cohesion’ in universities, authorised by the Ministry of Education in the light of the UFS incident, noted that racism and sexism were ‘pervasive’ features of university life (Soudien Report 2009). If it was not for the incident at UFS, there would have been no investigation about social cohesion in universities, and racism...
and sexism in universities would not have been made matters of public concern. The report, then, represents an indictment of the failure to recognise racism and sexism as problems in universities.

While concerns about racism in universities may have been prompted by the blatantly racist incident at UFS, research on ‘social cohesion’ in universities must avoid making too much of this. For if this becomes a point of reference such research may fail to see and indeed serve to obscure the subtleties and complexities of race (and gender and class) and power as these are played out, lived and experienced in specific institutions.

In contrast with UFS (at the time of the racist incident) many universities in South Africa, though not all, have residences which are ‘racially’ mixed (with significant numbers of students from different ‘races’) and which have been so for a long time. Also, compared with UFS, which holds lectures in Afrikaans (attended mainly by white students) and in English (attended mainly by black students) lecture theatres in English language universities in South Africa are much more ‘racially’ mixed. In the light of the incident at UFS, investigations in other universities, which explore whether students of other ‘races’ co-exist in broadly similar spaces and whether there are any explicit forms of opposition to this, may also conclude that ‘race’ relations pose no cause for concern.

In a special edition of the online publication, University World News, (www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story 4/5/2008) in which leading South African academics were invited to respond to the UFS incident, Amanda Gouws (at Stellenbosch University) warns of the danger of defining racism in terms of its ‘extreme’ and ‘blatant’ manifestations as in the UFS video and, as a result, failing to reflect on the ‘subtle’ and everyday forms of racism ‘encoded in the norms and behaviour of institutional cultures that are notoriously difficult to change’. These are forms of racism, which are not spoken and taken for granted and which may be present in the structure of the university residences and ordinary practices of social division and social interaction.

Rather than understanding concepts of integration in opposition to forms of blatant racism and associating this with institutional co-existence, Gouws argues for a broader definition of integration which she associates with voluntary mingling between different ‘races’, with the implication that this may not be happening on university campuses:

When is a campus integrated? When students of different “race” groups sit together in the same residence, yet do not mingle outside these spheres? Or when they respect each other’s differences even when they do not live in the same residence?

Following Gouws, I suggest that integration, defined not just as co-existence with others, but as engagement and friendship between students of different ‘races’, should be put on to the research agenda in any investigation on ‘race’ and student relations at universities. However, I also suggest that this is unlikely mainly because of the tendency in post-apartheid South Africa to take the absence of such kinds of relations as the norm.
In this article I argue for and try to illustrate the importance of conducting an investigation on students, ‘race’ and social cohesion, focusing on a particular English speaking and recently merged university, the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I draw on participatory research with students at the university and in some of its feeder schools. I also discuss principles and concerns, which ought, in my view, to inform appropriate kinds of investigative research.

Concerns about the slow pace of ‘transformation’ at UKZN have been raised mainly by black academics in the university’s ‘Black African Academic Forum’. For example this group compiled a report in 2005 critical of the enduring ‘racial’ inequalities among academic staff, with whites dominating the senior positions. But the expression of concerns such as these has sometimes taken quite essentialist forms, which homogenise and polarise black and white interests and construct ‘race’ as the key source of identification and dimension of power. This has led, according to Nithaya Chetty, an academic and proponent of ‘academic freedom’, to ‘a culture of incivility and “racial” stereotyping that is impeding the free exchange of ideas’ at UKZN. (Chetty 2007, 436)

Perhaps the most blatant example of this concerned the racialisation of a high profile dispute in 2008 on the topic of ‘academic freedom’. This dispute arose when charges were levelled by the Vice Chancellor against two academics (one of whom was Nithaya Chetty) who criticised the University leadership in the media for not allowing debate in the university Senate on a motion on academic freedom. In response to this the (black) Vice Chancellor and the (Indian) Director of Communications presented them and their supporters at UKZN as a conservative minority (generally understood as a code for whites) at odds with the interests of the university and opposed to the spirit of the merger and the ideals of ‘transformation’. Though many of these critics were, indeed, white, their whiteness was seized upon to explain and discredit their views.

The framing of the dispute as a ‘racial’ one, it could be argued, produces or reinforces ‘racial’ oppositions, and, at the same time, detracts from conflicts which are not at all ‘racially’ based, for example ones which arise from an authoritarian style of leadership and a managerial ethic (concerns about lack of academic freedom had been raised before by staff, notably in a strike at the university over pay, when they were forbidden to give media interviews, and registers were kept to monitor whether or not they reported to work).

This example illustrates one of the challenges posed in investigating ‘race’ and social cohesion: how to do so without starting from the position that ‘race’ already exists as an important category which determines students’ lives, relations and identities. The significance of ‘race’, I argue, needs to be explored not assumed, and other factors such as gender and class need to be considered (as I illustrate in this article) as possible sources of identification and dimensions of power along and in conjunction with ‘race’.

I put ‘race’ in quotation marks because, as I elaborate in the section immediately below, ‘race’ has no biological basis and only exists because we invoke the idea of
‘race’ in language and define ourselves and others through a ‘racial’ lens. Does this mean, as Paul Gilroy asked at a conference on the ‘Burden of Race’, (University of the Witwatersrand, 2003), that as researchers we can investigate ‘race’ without reifying it and contributing to the categorisation of people in terms of ‘races’? Responding to this challenge, I address some of the epistemological and ethical problems arising from doing this kind of research, (notably how such research maybe implicated in producing the very categories it seeks to investigate), and try to take a non-racial approach which is not ‘colour blind’ (Dalmage 2003, 13–15).

Thinking about ‘race’

What form investigative research might take depends crucially on how ‘race’ is theorised, and I want to argue here for thinking about ‘race’ along social constructionist lines. Social constructionist accounts of ‘race’ challenge the very concept ‘race’ and the implication that individuals automatically identify with and gravitate towards others in terms of specific biological characteristics such as skin colour. Rather than taking ‘race’ for granted, as if we already know what it is because it has already been defined, and rather than attributing qualities to ‘race’ as if these determine and explain the kind of person someone essentially is, social constructionists address ‘race’ as a discursive category. ‘Race’ is conceived by social constructionists as a verb, not an adjective, a classificatory process, not a description of an essence. But if ‘race’ implies processes of classification, it is also produced through these, and the effect of this is to obscure these processes and to encourage the view that ‘race’ simply identifies and describes a (fundamental) essence individuals already have.

According to social constructionist writers there are no black, white or Indian essences, rather renderings of whiteness, for example, make sense only in relation to characteristics constructed as Other, as black and (in the context of UKZN) Indian as well. ‘Races’ are produced relationally through processes of categorisation and ‘Othering’, but the impression is created that they already exist independently as categories of people. These constructions of the Other (as some social constructionists, influenced by psycho-analysis, have argued) are projections: a sense of ‘racial’ identity is derived through constructing the ‘racial’ Other, which becomes a peg onto which fears or desires can be hung (see, for example, Frosh 2002, 62).

This understanding of ‘race’ and ‘racial’ dynamics has important implications for addressing the question I posed earlier about whether an investigation at UKZN on ‘social cohesion’ and ‘race’ should only explore this in terms of peaceful co-existence or engagement of people from different ‘races’ with each other. If the criterion of ‘social cohesion’ (when it comes to ‘race’ relations) is taken to be peaceful co-existence, the investigation may, itself, contribute to the reification of ‘racial’ identifications at the University. For the starting point of the investigation would be ‘races’ as independent categories, and the question would be whether people slot into these categories in ways which make them just different or aggressively so.

Turning to the engagement of students and learners with each other as a guiding criteria for investigating social cohesion and ‘race’ focuses attention on processes
through which students categorise each other, and the significance, if any, which is
accorded to ‘race’ in these. Do students engage and socialise with each other in ways
which imply they attach little significance to ‘race’? Are affiliations and friendships
racialised or cross ‘racial’, and if the latter, what sorts of identity catalysts tend to
promote this? For example to what extent does gender, age, home area, subject choice
or hobbies provide common sources of identification which lead to the development
of cross ‘racial’ friendships?

RESEARCHING STUDENT IDENTITIES AND RELATIONS AT UKZN

Student breakdown
UKZN is the product of a recent merger between an ‘Indian’ University, the
University of Durban Westville, and an English speaking ‘white’ one, the University
of Natal (though ‘racial’ mixing in what was then the University of Natal occurred
decades before the end of apartheid). In 2005, among the student population at
Howard College (the largest campus at UKZN and part of the former University of
Natal) there were 7 264 Africans, 612 coloureds, 6 494 Indians and 3 379 whites.\(^1\)
Nominally, then Howard College is no longer predominantly ‘white’ but ‘racially’
mixed. But do the various groups which students construct and engage with on
campus in break and recreational periods entrench and encourage relationships
constructed along ‘racial’ lines or do they challenge these? Studies in the higher
education sector by Erasmus and De Wet (2003) and Steyn and Van Zyl (2001) found
that cross ‘racial’ interaction was extremely limited. Is this the case at UKZN, or are
the apartheid divisions and categories being broken down? Just how significant is
‘race’ as a marker of group identity at UKZN?

The significance of ‘race’ at UKZN
These questions were addressed unintentionally by some third year undergraduate
sociology students in an exercise I asked them to do in small groups at the
University’s Howard College campus. The students had started a course on ‘social
identities’ which I was taking, and this exercise was intended to encourage them to
think about group identifications and dynamics. I asked them to identify and map
student groupings on campus, and taking individuals from these, to find out whether
they expressed any sense of group affiliation.

Perhaps the most striking finding from this exercise was how racialised the groups
the students identified were. Indeed it was reported in some accounts how certain
spaces on campus came to be seen as white, black or Indian, so frequently were they
habituated by students in mono-racial groups. Social class, it was found, also played
a part in influencing where students hung out, but this was always in conjunction
with ‘race’. Even in relatively mixed spaces it was reported as being unusual for
black, Indian and white students (and especially undergraduates) to socialise and
engage with each other. And in lecture theatres students, it was found, tended to
sit with others with whom they identified as the same ‘race’ (for elaboration on the research findings and methodology, see Pattman 2007).

Even the research groups which my students formed were divided largely along ‘race’ lines despite my request when introducing the exercise that they split into groups of 5 or 6 comprising preferably people they did not know very well. Significantly, out of the 8 groups which were formed, all bar 2 were ‘mono-racial’, and this was in a class which was made up of 21 Indians, 13 blacks, 6 whites and 2 coloured students. Not only did ‘race’ influence the composition of the research groups, but also which students (following the mapping exercise) they chose to research, notably those with whom they shared the same racialised identity.

Examples of ‘racial’ integration

Some students also reflected on their own group affiliations at UKZN, and the few examples of ‘racial’ integration, which were reported, came from these students. Significantly, these examples were presented as exceptions against a backdrop of ‘racial’ identifications and differentiations. For example, one of the student researchers from Botswana, who was used to socialising in mixed racial groups in her country, wrote about the attention she and her group of friends on campus drew from other students and lecturers. This was because her group comprised a coloured, an Indian, two whites and a black. Her friendship, as a black woman with a white man, aroused particular curiosity and was commonly interpreted as sexual since it was presumed it could not possibly arise from shared cultural interests. What this account showed, so strikingly, was not only how little integration there was between students from different ‘races’, but also how taken for granted this was (see Selohilwe 2007). Significantly, in this research exercise it was only students from other countries who reported on their experiences of ‘race’ at UKZN. Their sensitivity to ‘race’ and ‘racial’ dynamics seemed to derive from their positions as outsiders who were less inclined to take ‘race’ for granted (compare Frantz Fanon, 1986, a black man from Martinique, living in colonial France in the 1950s).

Notably, for the minority of students working in multi-‘racial’ research groups, the research made them revise their views of ‘racial’ others and relate to each other in less racialised ways. For example, in one group black students reported how different the white member of their group was from who they imagined as ‘a rough rugby playing Afrikaner, who probably is difficult to work with . . . a snob who had everything handed to them on a silver platter’. They also reported being surprised at becoming ‘sms buddies’ with white and Indian students in the group. One student in this group described her group members as ‘the most diverse bunch of individuals I have ever come across’. Given that students experience such ‘racial’ diversity every day on campus, presumably she was meaning ‘the most diverse bunch of individuals’ with whom she had mixed in an engaging way, with ‘race’ (as opposed to religion, class, interests in music, sport and all sorts of other things) becoming the proxy for diversity.
DIFFICULTIES RESEARCHING ‘RACE’

In spite of the significance attached to ‘race’ as a marker of identity in relation to the various groups they distinguished, and as exemplified by their own choice of students to work with and research, the student researchers expressed concern about using racialised categories on the assumption that this might invite the accusation that they were racist. Some of the student researchers, for example, reported wanting to ask questions about whether their interviewees in their ‘mono-racial’ groups ever mixed with students from other ‘races’, but were hesitant about doing so for fear of being ‘offensive’. When such questions were put, some of the student researchers reported their interviewees (though rarely black interviewees) becoming ‘defensive’ (and sometimes aggressively so). Typical responses were that they mixed with their friends, or with people with similar interests, and ‘race’ was inconsequential, and/or that they did, indeed, mix with students of other ‘races’, and that this was a common practice on campus. This was an assertion, which flew in the face of the student researchers’ observations. Anxieties produced by questions about ‘race’ and mixing seemed particularly acute for both researcher and researched when they were of a different ‘race’ and religion, thus reinforcing the assumption that the most appropriate researchers were of similar ‘race’ and religion as the groups of students they were researching.

Of course it could be argued that by focusing on ‘race’ the student researchers were inviting their interviewees to attach more significance to ‘race’ than they would otherwise. Indeed some writers have suggested that ‘race’ is made significant (in the post apartheid era) precisely because it is invoked in everyday social and institutional practices, including, presumably, research practices (see e.g. Mare 2001). But my students were not given instructions to look for or be sensitive to ‘racial’ affiliations and divisions. In preparation for this exercise we had only discussed Schutz’s (1944) ‘The Stranger’ and the sociological importance of seeing everyday social worlds and practices through the eyes of strangers, and not taking them for granted.

It was difficult to put such questions, I suggest, not because ‘racial’ categories were of no significance now for students in a merged university in the post-apartheid era, but because of the tendency for students (both as researchers and researched) to conflate talking about ‘race’ or ‘racial’ issues with being racist. While researchers need to be aware of how they may lead their interviewees to think ‘racially’, they need to be equally sensitive to the ways ‘racial’ identities may be articulated (in more ‘acceptable’ ways in a post-apartheid context) through, for example, interests, (as seemed to be the case in many of the student responses above) or tastes (Dolby 2001) or culture (Durrheim and Mtose 2006).

The student researchers at UKZN found no evidence of the kinds of racist attitudes displayed by some white students at UFS. On the contrary, according to them, a number of interviewees identified as children of the Rainbow Nation (first coined by Desmond Tutu when envisaging the ‘new’ South Africa and celebrating ‘racial’ diversity). But student identities were strongly defined in ‘racial’ terms, and, as I will go on to demonstrate, with particular reference to black identities (and
whiteness), these identities did not simply co-exist as independent entities but were actively constructed in opposition to each other.

The black residences
The residences were identified by my student researchers as black places because black students lived there. This was in sharp contrast to the infamous, predominantly white Reitz residence at UFS. At UFS opposition by some white students to the university’s policy of integrating the residences was motivated by concerns that their identities and privileges were under threat. What has happened at UKZN is more or less the opposite; with the influx of black students, white South African students have long since left the residences, and the only white students are international students doing modular courses. Some of the black student researchers who were members of residences reported that these were almost exclusively black, and, further, that they were relatively run down with few facilities and no refectory, as there once was. (The refectories were closed not, of course, because, the University deemed it appropriate to do so as the residences became increasingly black, but because the black students, themselves, wanted this; they preferred to buy food from outside rather than pay for refectory meals which many felt they could ill afford and did not particularly like.) It was assumed by my black student researchers that it was because whites and Indians were affluent enough to afford alternative accommodation that there were no local whites and Indians in the residences.

In their study of students’ perceptions and experiences of institutional culture at the University of Cape Town, Steyn and Van Zyl (2001) also found that residences promoted class and ‘race’ based inequalities. Here, however, the residences were not inferior spaces dominated by blacks. The residences were nominally integrated, but segregation occurred informally with certain ‘races’ clustering in specific residences and whites in the more expensive and better resourced residences.

At UKZN the residences were not simply places which housed black students, but became important symbolic markers of identity and difference in relation to ‘race’. They were constructed as black, and associated either with symbiotic and caring communities (as in some of the residents’ accounts) or with poor and dangerous spaces (as in some of the accounts given by outsiders). For example, when asked by a white researcher whether, in view of their long car journey to work every day, they would ever consider living in the residences, a number of white women sounded surprised and made it clear that neither they nor their parents could entertain such an idea for reasons of safety. These women generalised about men in the residences as being loud and uncouth. Given the lack of ‘racial’ integration on campus, it is hardly surprising, perhaps, that caricatures and stereotypes of ‘racial’ others have so much purchase.
Gender based violence in the residences and opposition to discussing this

But even if these women’s constructions of the residences as dangerous spaces may have been influenced by stereotypical associations (with a long cultural history) of black people (and especially black men) with crime and violence (see Callebert 2007), their concerns about levels of violence in the residences were certainly not without foundation. Following the rape of an international student in one of the residences in 2007, a review of safety and security was conducted, which reported that gender based violence was ‘rife’ in the Halls of residence, and supported by cultures of misogyny and homophobia (MacKay and Magwaza, July 2008, 21).

Such values seemed to be exemplified by a group of students (mainly men and associated with the Students’ Representative Council (SRC)) in a meeting called by concerned members of staff and students to discuss women’s safety in the residences following the rape of the international student. I want to focus, here, on the responses of these students in the meeting (rather than the question of women’s safety in the residences which the Report addressed), and consider why these students took the positions they did and what their commitments to these implied about their own sense of identity as black men (and women) living in the residences.

At the meeting these students complained that it was because the rape victim was an American and not a black South African that the incident was attracting so much attention. Actually she was not American, although she went to an American university. The construction of her as American (even if this was unintentional), with contemporary connotations of global power and imperialism, reinforced their grievances.

They accused those at the meeting who expressed concerns about women’s safety in the residences and who called for a more urgent response to this matter from the (black) Deputy Vice Chancellor for student affairs (DVC) and the (black) Vice Chancellor (VC), of pursuing ‘hidden agendas’ (a barely disguised euphemism for being racist). Later, in press statements they described them as ‘white’ and ‘old’ (even though black, white and Indian staff and students had aired grievances about women’s safety in the residences and the response of the University leadership).

Emotions became increasingly frayed, with the SRC students (and supporters) condemned for derailing the agenda about women’s safety and making an issue out of ‘race’ when there was none to be had, and the SRC students (and supporters) feeling under siege and becoming more forceful in their accusations of racism.

As the meeting was breaking up, some SRC students spoke out about ‘our Deputy President’ (Zuma was Deputy President at the time) and his vilification and vindication (in their view) in his rape trial. Similar views had been expressed by black, isiZulu speaking men and women students, interviewed shortly after the announcement of the verdict. Zuma was constructed, by these students, as an icon of black culture and a man of the people (representing the interests of blacks still experiencing the inequities of apartheid and the ‘racial’ polarisation of resources), and the rape trial was interpreted not only as an attack on Zuma, but also on black
‘culture’. (see Pattman 2006). By invoking Zuma’s name at the end of the meeting, the SRC students were constructing themselves, as they did Zuma, as victims and also as defenders of ‘culture’ in ways which effectively blocked any discussion about the safety of women in the residences.

Sexuality emerged here, as it did in their reactions to the Zuma rape trial, as an important medium through which tensions relating to gender and ‘culture’ were expressed. ‘Culture’ was used synonymously with ‘race’, with the SRC students and others characterising those who were raising concerns about women’s safety in the residences as cultural outsiders and imputing racist motives to them. Furthermore, ‘culture’, as invoked by these students, contained taken-for-granted patriarchal values; by making concerns about women’s safety the issue they contested, when defending ‘culture’, these students were eliding opposition to assumed forms of racism with assertions of male authority. In studies of student identities in other higher educational institutions in Southern Africa (Pattman 2001; Pattman 2005), similar discourses about ‘culture’ which positioned black men as its defenders and preservers also framed (often heated) discussions about gender and sexuality.

**Why was ‘race’ introduced?**

This example highlights the danger of researchers failing to pick up on the construction of ‘racial’ differences (and inequalities) couched in the language of interests, tastes and culture. By the same token, the language of ‘race’ (or ‘culture’ used synonymously with ‘race’) can, equally, be deployed in ways which obscure constructions of gender differences and inequalities, as we see in the responses of the SRC students. These SRC students were asserting themselves as men in the name of defending ‘culture’, making an issue of ‘race’ in a meeting about women’s safety in the residences. But why were they asserting themselves in these ways? To respond to this, I am going to argue, we need to focus on both gender and ‘race’.

It was commonly assumed by critics that they were playing the ‘race card’ in order to further their political careers, and were simply unaccountable, as student representatives (see Essa and Lorgat 2007). But while some black students at the meeting (most notably women) got angry with the SRC students, others, including women who lived in the residences and did not attend the meeting, expressed similar concerns about the time and attention accorded to the rape of the international student. What I want to suggest is that the responses of the SRC students at the meeting were motivated, in part, by anxieties rooted in feelings of subordination which they experienced as black students living in the residences. Some of the students, it emerged, felt picked upon and discriminated against ‘racially’ by those who characterised the residences (generally constructed as black) as dangerous spaces and became defensive.

Life in the residences must feature prominently in any investigation on social cohesion, and, contrary to the position which the SRC students seemed to take, such an investigation must focus on the safety of women (and men) students. A sense of
safety is not only a criterion for social cohesion but also for agency. For fear of rape (and other forms of sexual violence and harassment) acts as, many feminist writers have argued (see, for example, Lees 1997) as a powerful mechanism of social control. But social cohesion, here, must not be defined only in relation to gender. Such an investigation must also explore the residences in relation to the wider University community, and here, as we have seen, ‘race’ is extremely pertinent. 

Investigative research needs to address the significance young people attach to ‘race’ even when race is deployed by them as a prism through which to view and reduce all social relations, as the SRC members tended to do. Rather than dismissing what they say about ‘race’ or taking this at face value, research needs to explore why they are so invested in essentialist versions of ‘race’ and culture and discourses of victimhood.

**Learning ‘race’ in schools**

Any investigation examining social cohesion and ‘race’ relations in a university is limited, I suggest, if it looks only at the university. For the kinds of relationships and identifications students make are, of course influenced and affected by their lives outside the University and prior to becoming students, including their experiences of schooling.

The public schooling system in South Africa plays a significant role producing and reinforcing ‘racial’ identities and inequalities. This is because the various types of public schools (rural, township, formerly Indian and formerly white) are so unequal in terms of resources and so different according to the ‘racial’ demographics of their learners and teachers. Though the formerly white schools with their mix of white, black and Indian students can be read as exemplars of post-apartheid integration, they are, when set in relation to the much more poorly resourced black schools, elitist institutions which reinforce assumptions about white superiority and black inferiority.

In a recent compilation of the top 100 public schools (in terms mainly of academic results) in South Africa (*Sunday Times*, October 2009) 94 were formerly white schools. Whites and blacks account respectively for about 9 per cent and 80 per cent of the population of South Africa, yet of the learners in these only 18 per cent were black and 67 per cent white.

This largely reflects the enormous disparity in resources between the formerly white and the other kinds of public schools in South Africa. In a study I am conducting with Deevia Bhana on learners’ experiences of schooling in different kinds of public schools in the Durban area (Turning 16/17: National Research Foundation) the contrast between the formerly white and township schools we are examining is striking. While the campus of the formerly white school is extensive with trees and playing fields, the learners in the township school have little space to move about at break times. There are long corridors and stairs at the formerly white school and an impressive looking administration block adorned with emblems of academic and sporting success, photos of school rugby and cricket teams of the past as well as
outstanding academic achievers. The township school comprises unconnected basic functional classrooms, with stone floors and drab walls, a staffroom and a principal’s office.

‘Racial’ divisions in terms of levels of affluence seem to be reproduced at UKZN. As we have already seen, the residences, like the township schools comprised only blacks and were poorly resourced, while generally more affluent students (white, Indians and blacks) lived off campus. Indeed almost all students from rural and black township schools sought accommodation in the residences.

But we found in our school based study that ‘racial’ divisions might be produced within the same ‘racially’ mixed feeder schools, as well as between different feeder schools, marked by very different levels of affluence. In our study we conducted (twenty two) ‘mono-racial’ and ‘racially’ mixed interviews with Grade 11 learners (16–17 year olds) in two formerly white (single sex) schools, and in a co-ed formerly Indian and black township school. These interviews were loosely structured around very general topics such as relations with girls and boys, pleasures and anxieties, aspirations and interests. ‘Race’ was raised spontaneously by most black and Indian learners (in ‘mono-racial’ groups) in the formerly white schools and by black learners in the formerly Indian schools, and not in response to a specific question which we posed about ‘race’. ‘Race’ was not only introduced by them, but spoken about in often emotionally engaged ways which permeated accounts of their attitudes to school and their relations, generally, with other girls and boys. This suggests that ‘race’ was a major source of identification and division for them in their merged schools (Pattman and Bhana 2009; Pattman and Bhana Forthcoming).

Indeed the mixed feeder schools were presented by many of the black and Indian learners who attended them, not as ‘melting pots’ (which might prepare them, later, for engaging and socialising in a merged university with people from different ‘races’) but as places where differences (and oppositions) along ‘race’ lines might even be reinforced. For example, black girls and boys in formerly white and Indian schools spoke about academic streaming of learners, with black learners featuring overwhelmingly in the lower streams, the high profile given to white girls receiving academic prizes and being appointed as prefects (in her study of learner cultures in formerly white schools, Vandeyar (2008, 294) found learners to be ‘fully aware’ of associations between ‘whiteness’ and ‘being selected as a prefect and having their voices heard’, and the virtual absence of black girls being publicly rewarded in school, and the tendency for teachers to associate black girls with trouble (a finding corroborated by Dawson 2007, in her study of formerly white schools).

‘Race’ was not given such a high profile by the black learners we interviewed in the township school precisely because their school was all black, (the teachers, the learners and the area in which it was located were black). This is not to say that for them ‘race’ was not a major source of identification. It was, but this emerged not in their spontaneous accounts of everyday experiences of schooling (as it did in the interviews with black learners in mixed schools) but when they were asked about their school and how it compared with other kinds of school outside their community.
They identified their school and themselves as black and raised concerns not only about poverty which they associated with black communities like theirs, but also concerning the symbolic de-valuation of black people as troublesome and ignorant. They also associated affluence, in contrast, with whites, but far from criticizing them constructed them as clever, virtuous and hard working. Whites were distant figures for them, they only encountered whites on a regular basis when watching TV, and they viewed them as fundamentally different and having little in common. It was young people of other ‘races’ whom they defined as more like them, namely Indians in the communities nearby, whom they criticized for thinking they were superior to them (Pattman and Bhana 2006; Pattman and Bhana 2009).

‘Coconuts’ at school and at UKZN

Black learners in formerly white schools complained of feeling marginalised not only inside but outside school where they had to deal with accusations by other blacks, from less (perceptively) affluent backgrounds, of being ‘coconuts’ (or whites in brown skins). They mentioned, for example, being called ‘coconut’ when travelling by public taxis and wearing their school uniform and/or speaking in English. It was blacks, not whites, who went to the relatively affluent formerly white schools who incited anxieties (among other blacks) about black inferiority. Such anxieties could be quelled by constructing them as coconuts, and as acting white, as if they – their black critics – were true blacks.

Significantly at UKZN the key ‘racial’ oppositions, according to the student researchers, were not between black and white, but black and black students, and notably between those who had been to the formerly white or Model C schools and others who had been to township or rural schools. Like the black learners Deevia Bhana and I interviewed in the township schools, blacks in the Residences spoke about whites as distant and privileged figures with whom they rarely interacted, but instead of blaming them for this, praised them, as if possessing superior qualities which accounted for their privileged position. Black students who had been to Model C schools (as well as Indians) were accused of trying to be superior to them (the township and rural blacks), or acting white. Hence the common characterisation of ex- Model C blacks as ‘coconuts’. When asked what the differences were between acting white and being white, they accused blacks and Indians who ‘acted’ white of ignoring them, and praised whites for greeting them.

The construction of white superiority, then, seemed to promote not only lack of integration between black and white learners and students in the formerly white schools and at the University, but divisions between blacks. At UKZN on the Howard College Campus these were represented symbolically and materially in the polarisation of the ‘Coconut ‘ and ‘S’khotheni’ (meaning ‘ghetto’ in Zulu) ‘villages’. These were specific areas on campus, which some of my black student researchers identified.

‘Coconut Village’ comprised black and white students, and the black students were seen as mixing with and emulating whites. Yet interaction between blacks and whites (reinforced perhaps by black students’ fears of being labelled in derogatory
ways) was limited even in ‘Coconut Village’. It was assumed most of the blacks in ‘Coconut Village’ were from Model C schools. Indeed ‘Model C’ and ‘coconut’ were used interchangeably to refer to the black students here. ‘S’khotheni Village’, represented the antithesis of ‘Coconut Village’. This was inhabited only by black African students who constructed themselves more or less as opposites of coconuts, as true and essential Zulus (see Durrheim and Mtose (2006) who found similar distinctions being drawn between black students at UKZN vis a vis their presumed relationship with whiteness.)

‘RACE’ AND CLASS

Intra ‘racial’ divisions and oppositions such as these are sometimes read as indicators of the declining influence of ‘race’ in the post-apartheid era and its replacement by social class as a source of identification and dimension of power. But what the mapping exercise at UKZN shows is that much importance continues to be attached to ‘race’, in conjunction with class (and other variables such as gender) in everyday interactions and identifications. As illustrated here, class and ‘race’ intersect in complex ways; we should not, (as researchers), address ‘race’ as a monolithic category, but neither should we explain identifications, attitudes, life styles and social interactions only in terms of class. For if class has supplanted ‘race’ as the basis of configuration why are ex-Model C blacks at UKZN criticised for acting white, and why do those accused of acting white not actually mix with whites but develop their own particular groups distinct from whites and township and rural blacks at UKZN? And if blacks are criticised for acting white and being aloof, why are whites, themselves, not lumped together with these blacks and also blamed?

Encouraging voices or producing ‘race’?

I have chosen to focus on black learners’ identifications and affiliations because they attached particular significance (at least explicitly) to ‘race’ when constructing their identities and were more likely than white and Indian learners to challenge assumptions about the ‘racially’ mixed formerly white and formerly Indian schools and the recently merged University of KwaZulu-Natal as ‘melting pots’. This is not to imply that the views of black students and learners carry more weight than whites or Indians; rather, as I have tried to illustrate, that they were more likely to feel and experience forms of marginalisation in these institutions. I draw, here, on standpoint theory which argues that as researchers we should start from the position of those who have traditionally been excluded from knowledge production (Olson and Hirsch 1995) and are able to offer insights into relations and dynamics of power about which those in more powerful and less marginalised positions may be unaware and take for granted.

But there is no raw experience which interviewees simply describe; rather experiences are always interpreted and constructed in particular ways which reinforce certain kinds of identifications or positions. The black learners and
Investigating ‘race’ and social cohesion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

students, to whom I have referred in this article, often constructed themselves in very essentialist ways, for example as true Africans, as opposed to Indians or Coconuts, fashioning identities and formulating experiences in quite exclusionary ways which (as some of their teachers complained) seemed to preclude forms of cross and intra ‘racial’ interaction. But these discourses should not be dismissed simply as racist and irrational. Rather they resonated with black learners’ and students’ accounts of marginalisation and concerns about inferiority, and were, as I have suggested, empowering (albeit in problematic and limited ways).

Their views were usually solicited when they were in ‘mono-racial’ groups when hanging about informally on campus or when interviewed in schools, and there is no doubt this affected how they presented themselves and spoke about ‘race’. It could be argued that by asking students in ‘mono-racial’ groups on campus why they hung around together or dividing learners (in the multi ‘racial’ schools) to be interviewed more generally about their lives and identities, these young people were being encouraged to reify ‘race’ and to think ‘racially’.

But the ‘mono-racial’ groups, I suggest, provided a space for people to talk about experiences of ‘race’ and racism, and notably for those students and learners who felt marginalised in their institutions. In the few mixed ‘race’ group interviews we conducted at the formerly white and formerly Indian schools, ‘race’ featured much less prominently than in the ‘mono-racial’ interviews with ‘racial’ minorities at these schools. It was only spoken about by the young people in response to our questions about ‘race’, and ‘racial’ tensions and oppositions were absent in their accounts. This, I suggest, reflected tendencies for young people not to talk about ‘race’ and ‘racial’ conflicts with people from other ‘races’ for reasons already mentioned. However, mixed ‘race’ interviews, with learners in schools, like the mixed ‘race’ research groups in which my students at UKZN participated, could provide opportunities for young people who did not normally interact with people of other ‘races’ to do so and to learn from each other in ways which challenged stereotypes of ‘racial’ others. At the end of some of these, participants expressed surprise at how open, friendly and accessible they had been with each other.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The aim of this article has been to suggest broad criteria which might frame an investigation into social cohesion in the light of the UFS incident and following the publication of the Soudien Report. I have argued that such an investigation should take integration rather than co-existence as a measure of social cohesion, and I have tried to illustrate what social cohesion might mean and how it might be investigated. In doing so I have drawn on the group mapping exercises I asked my students to do (and my interpretations of these), as well as my own research in some of the feeder schools. Though this research is clearly limited in scope in terms of the range of students and learners and the social settings it addresses and by the methods used, it is nevertheless suggestive of the form and direction such an investigation might take.
My concern in this article has not only been to present relevant findings from particular research exercises conducted at UKZN and in the feeder schools, but also to draw on these to argue for ways of doing research and forms of interpretation and analysis which, in my view, should inform an investigation into ‘race’ (and other categories such as gender) and social cohesion at the university. In particular, I have drawn on this research to argue for ways of investigating ‘race’ and social cohesion in UKZN (and other educational institutions) without reifying ‘race’ and without going to the opposite extreme and ‘wishing “race” away’.

The challenge is to investigate whether indeed ‘race’ is of any significance in structuring and ordering relations at the University, and if so, what form this takes. Whether research which focuses on ‘race’ reifies it depends on how it addresses ‘race’. Does it address ‘race’ as a blanket which envelops everyone of the same skin colour (however this is defined) so that all we need to do, as researchers, is to read off people’s attitudes and behaviour from their skin colour? Or does it investigate whether people draw on ‘race’ as a source of identification in various contexts, and, if so, how ‘race’ articulates with other variables such as class, gender, sexuality, schooling etc. in influencing identifications and opportunities.

The focus must be on how ‘race’ is produced, and this means, in part, examining forms of racialised thinking and the habitual and everyday use of the very categories of ‘race’. The problem is that if ‘race’ is produced through everyday thought processes, it may be taken for granted and not noticed by researchers from similar cultural environments. In the student research exercise it was ‘outsiders’ or students from other countries who provided the most revealing accounts of the everyday construction of ‘race’ through forms of racial thinking. But focusing on how ‘race’ is produced also means investigating cultural and material conditions which encourage racialised forms of thinking. For example, how the Residences at UKZN are constructed as black and how the Residences as all black (and relatively run down) institutions in a racially mixed university, in turn, produce ‘race’. ‘Race’ may have no biological basis but that does not mean researchers should treat ‘race’ simply as a linguistic category with the implication that it would not exist if people would only stop thinking racially. Research on the significance of ‘race’ at UKZN needs to explore how a human invention, becomes a material reality through the racialisation of certain spaces and institutions on and off campus, and how these in turn influence and constrain student movements, associations and identifications.

While researchers must avoid reifying race this does not mean ignoring the views of students who may construct race along essentialist lines (as in some of the examples given in this article). These views need to be taken seriously and questions raised about why they may be held so strongly by some students and learners. What do their investments in these tell us about their experiences as students and learners in particular institutions? In examples presented in this article it was suggested that essentialist discourses of race and culture might hold particular attractions for black students and learners who may feel marginalised in their institutions.
The research findings emphasise lack of integration (understood in terms of social engagement rather than co-existence of students and learners of different ‘races’). However, this is certainly not intended to be taken as a final pronouncement. Rather it is suggestive of a range of research projects on the theme of social cohesion (and ‘race’, gender, sexuality, age, class etc.) and how students construct their identities, relate to others and experience university life.

The starting point in any investigation into social cohesion at a university, must be how university life is understood and experienced by different students. More focused research on particular student groupings would provide more nuanced accounts of the lives and identities of these students, and the influence, (if any), of ‘race’, gender, sexuality, age, class, schooling etc in shaping their backgrounds and as markers of identity. One would expect such research to yield more detailed information on the formation of particular student groupings, and provide examples of these which cut across ‘race’ (generally, or in particular contexts.)

For even if ‘race’ is re-formulated as ‘taste’ or ‘interests’ in ways which re-produce racism, spaces are nevertheless opened up by re-formulation and by the merger for the formation of new identities and relations which cut across ‘race’ (Dolby 2001). And even if the official Rainbow Nation discourse may be appropriated, by various students, in ways which obscure and legitimate ‘racial’ segregation, it may also, as Walker (2005, 53) argues in her study of student identities in an historically white Afrikaans medium university, ‘loosen the hold of race and make new subject positions possible and desirable’.

Indeed even though the research, on which this article is based, has suggested ‘lack of integration’ (understood in terms of social engagement rather than co-existence of students and learners of different races) is a feature of campus life at UKZN and in some of the mixed feeder schools, possibilities of more integrated relations were raised in the very processes of conducting this research: for example, in the dynamics produced in the ‘racially’ mixed group interviews in the schools and in the few ‘racially’ mixed groups some of my students formed to conduct the research exercise at UKZN. Identities are fluid not fixed, and, opportunities exist at a mixed school or a merged university for engaging with and learning about those normally defined along ‘racial’ lines as other, and challenging (taken for granted) identifications and divisions.

How to encourage forms of integration on a wider scale should constitute a major concern in the mixed schools and in the merged university. We need, I have argued, to research student experiences without homogenizing students and explore difference and diversity. But we also need to focus on commonalities of experience at the very basic level which arise from attending the same lecture or tutorial or activity on campus, and the potential these may carry for promoting possibilities of integration between students from different backgrounds. Following the impact of the research activity on the mixed student researchers at UKZN, activities and exercises could be developed (as part of a long and sustained orientation programme or embedded in the curriculum), which require students from different backgrounds to work together in small groups and investigate aspects of campus life and student interests.
In this sense then appropriate forms of research, as suggested in this article, may provide examples of good pedagogic practices for working with students and learners to promote forms of integration and engagement between students/learners across race, gender and class, etc.

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NOTE

This is the ‘racial’ terminology used by official sources in the University, though none of the ‘African’ students in this research actually used ‘African’, referring to themselves, rather, as ‘black’. For this reason I sometimes use black and African interchangeably.

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