Race matters and the emergence of class: Views from selected South African university students

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Abstract
In 2008, the Department of Education (DoE) produced a report on social cohesion in higher education (HE) noting the importance of investigating and addressing race and student identities. Against this backdrop, this article examines how a group of black working class students at a university in KwaZulu-Natal talk about race. Despite widening participation of black students at the university, class, language and space were invoked during interviews including the middle class space of the ‘Italian coffee shop’ as entangled in the reproduction of inequalities. The analysis draws attention to the micro dynamics of class in students’ understanding of race and its relation to broader social and historical forces which crystallise into sharp inequalities for working class black students. Within the university environment it is important to recognise students’ differentiated experiences which serve to complicate a homogenous understanding of race. Treating all students in essentialist or undifferentiated racial terms would miss how class and race are invoked, maintained and produced within specific university settings and has important implications for the development of context specific interventions in HE.

Keywords: race, class, student identities, poverty, inequalities

INTRODUCTION
In 2007, a racist incident involving white male students at the University of the Free State (UFS) put race relations and student cultures in South Africa under the spotlight. The incident arose when a home-made video, which was filmed in a former whites-only hostel, showed five black workers taking part in initiation rituals which included kneeling to eat food into which white students had urinated. Vociferous condemnation followed and the Minister of Education commissioned an investigation on ‘social cohesion’ in universities. The findings of the report noted that racism was a pervasive feature of South African university life (DoE 2008) spurring universities across the country to develop policies and processes to deal with it. This article is set against a backdrop of contemporary concerns about race and social cohesion in higher education (HE) in South Africa.

Towards this end, the article examines how a group of black students, identified as working class at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) talk about race.
Taking a cue from Soudien (2010) the article argues that students’ narratives of race require attention to the critical links between social structures and the ‘actual student realities’ that produce such inequalities. Despite widening participation of black students at the university, the article focuses on the intimate relations between race and class as entangled in the reproduction of inequalities. In analysing student testimonies the article draws attention to the micro dynamics of class, its relation to broader social and historical forces which crystallise into sharp inequalities for working class black students.

One of dangers of the understanding race as given and unchanging is that it makes invisible the relationship between large-scale social structures and the micro economic processes through which racial identities are produced. This has led many sociologists working in the field of student identities and HE to critique a reductionist account of race which hides the complex relationship between social inequalities and identities (Pattman 2007). In addressing race and class dynamics, the article supports and reiterates the significance of problematising narrow and fixed understandings of race and argues for consideration of the social forces and the social conditions which are intimately tied to exclusion and marginalisation. The central argument is that whilst the racialised parameters of apartheid continue to have consequences for student relations, they do so within the actual student realities of class inequalities.

In South African HE, less attention has been paid to the ways in which class and race coalesce to produce student identities. Whilst racism remains a critical factor in HE, an understanding of racism must also be rendered in ‘class terms’ -- a point noted by Soudien (2010). Within the broader South African social context, Seekings and Natrass (2005) recognising the changing class dynamics, conceptualise three categories of people in South Africa, namely: the African poor; the mostly African working classes; and the rest, including the African/Indian/white/coloured middle classes and elites. In South African HE, for example, the number of black students enrolling at former white universities is increasing, nonetheless access to and participation in HE remains more restrictive for the majority -- the black African poor/working class with poor educational outcomes for working class black students. The high cost of university tuition has meant that it is the black middle class that has benefited from access to HE, thereby accentuating class divisions. Where access has been enabled for the African poor and working classes, this has been mainly the result of state interventions. Recognising the injustices in relation to access for poor students, the South African state has attempted to increase and change the current student profile by increasing state funded loan agreements and bursary schemes. This in itself has not alleviated concerns about access to and educational outcomes of HE but is a short-term remedy to the country’s legacies of inequalities and persistent social and economic marginalisation.

When students come together in the changing context of South African HE, they do so in the crucible of race and class inequalities which are tied to the economies of history, inequalities and privilege. These social differences have consequences for students’ experiences in and observations of university life. The article thus provides
further warrant for critically engaging with and recognising the differentiated experiences of students which serve to complicate a homogenous understanding of race. Treating all students in essentialist or undifferentiated racial terms would miss how class and race are invoked, maintained, and produced within specific university settings and has important implications for the development of context specific interventions in HE.

RESEARCH METHODS

The data presented in the article is derived from a qualitative study of selected students’ accounts of race at UKZN. In the article the specific focus is on racialised experiences as they are articulated by black working class students. Such a reflection from a group of black students has the potential to disrupt and transform racist norms that have been found to be prevalent at South African higher education institutions (HEIs) (Soudien 2008). Such insight is valuable for its potential to provide context specific knowledge from a group of students marginalised by race and class and the possibilities of developing context specific interventions to transform such inequities. In focusing on a group of black students the article is careful not to present a picture of an essentialised understanding of race as a fixed and knowable identity group but rather, as Keddie and Williams (2012) note, the possibility exists that common experiences in a society that has deprecated black working class people in particular has the potential to develop common themes of marginalisation.

At this juncture it must be noted that whilst the use of apartheid’s definition of black/African is problematic, it continues to hold value in the country especially in the context of social redress. In many HEIs increasing the number of black students remains an important arena of social redress contributing to a diversification. At UKZN, in 2005, 49.1 per cent of the student population was black, 15.2 per cent white and 32.6 per cent Indian. By 2012, the total student population comprised 63.9 per cent black and 26.2 per cent Indian. The population of the city of Durban, where UKZN is located, can be identified as 68 per cent black, 20 per cent Indian, 3 per cent coloured and 9 per cent white (Statistics South Africa 2001). The larger percentage of Indians at the university, despite Indians making up less than 3 per cent of South Africa’s population, is the consequence of apartheid restrictions of movement to the province of KwaZulu-Natal and their recruitment as indentured labourers in the 1860s to the province.

If the recent changes in the racial profile at an aggregate level are considered, it appears that UKZN has desegregated substantially thereby reflecting Durban’s population dynamics. It is simplistic to assume however that UKZN’s student racial profile works on the assumption of linearity moving from segregation to integration. One of the central issues that has emerged from the findings of the report on racism in HE in South Africa (DoE 2008) is the problem of linking student identities in reductionist ways to race producing unhelpful binaries and re-creating essentialist
thinking underpinned by apartheid without deeper consideration of class, setting and context (Dolby 2001).

The analysis derives from 11 individual interviews and four focus groups conducted with black students. The interviews were conducted on the Howard College campus of UKZN and lasted between 60–90 minutes. The interviews were designed to gather information about, and explore how, the participants gave meaning to race, their views about cross-racial interactions and concerns about marginalisation. The data presented in the article reflects students’ concerns with social differentiation and racialised oppression. The focus of the article is not on individual students but on common themes. It aims to highlight how race relations continues to persist in hierarchical ways, but also how class was given saliency in the students’ discussion of race.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted encouraging the participants to take the interview in the direction they thought was important, setting the research agenda for the ways in which they spoke about race. The analysis involved searching through the transcribed data and highlighting thematic patterns of meanings used by students. The focus on the poor black as being academically slower; the tough economic circumstances that mitigate equitable experiences at university; as well as the limits of racialised interactions were common throughout student testimonies. The specific focus of the current article is on these common themes around marginalisation and separation as discussed in the next section.

**‘HAVING IT TOUGH’: POOR BLACK STUDENTS AND MARGINALISATION**

In response to questions about how race matters, students focused on the financially needy putting into focus what Natrass and Seekings (2005) refer to as the plight of the African poor and the African working class:

... at the University of KwaZulu-Natal ... when it comes to financial problems blacks are more affected than ... Indian students and white students ... it doesn’t mean that you don’t have white and Indian students who are struggling financially. It just means that those students who are having it tough in the university are the black students [black male].

A strong association with poverty and social inequality produces differential and adverse outcomes for financially needy students, which include white and Indian students, although it is the African poor, in the main and the majority, who struggle financially and have it tough at university. The financially ‘needy’ students (poor and working class black students) are situated within the complex nexus of historical inequalities anchored in racial contempt and class inequalities. Whilst there are positive interventions to secure access to the university through social redress (eg, scholarships and bursaries) these alone are not enough. An anomalous situation is amplified here putting opportunity into tension with social histories, racial inequalities and setting the limits for poor and working class black students.
Keeping materiality, steep inequalities, race and academic disadvantage in tension with each other prevents a homogenous conceptualisation of being black as a disadvantage. Students raised the issue of disadvantage linking it to social conditions:

If you are coming from a rural school it will be something that becomes a very big part of their lives if you are coming from a multiracial school it will also be different the way you relate to other people [black female].

Negative social outcomes at the university are directly linked to histories of schooling and differentiated schooling systems. As Hunter (2010) notes, this geography of schooling and potential class mobility cannot be separated from the marginalisation of other poorer blacks from rural or township areas who cannot afford to send their children to better resourced English-medium schools. The class inequalities thus differentiate between black students who have emerged from the advantaged ‘multiracial school’ comprising the fee-paying multi-racial middle classes and those who attended rural schools. Power inequalities are reproduced and class/race differences elaborated in students’ experiences of HE. In Hunter’s (2010) account of desegregating schools, it is noted that at a general level South Africa has been characterised by a class shift with greater mobility of the black richer classes who send their children to the better English-medium schools outside of the African townships. Their children benefit from attending these prestigious schools, gaining competency in English, which is a tool for economic mobility, and assimilate within the cultural and social capital associated with university success (see Walker 2005).

The language problem is a huge problem because you find the first two weeks of you coming to university you are expected in a social science degree to produce 2500 words you must type this you must write it in good English ... I am from a background that has never taught me proper English language yet I am expected as soon as I get to university to write that but it does not cut across race per say but it’s just certain groups per race. Many, many black students are adversely affected by attitude of lecturers because of inability to express themselves [black male].

The focus above, on black disadvantaged students and their marginalisation in the academic environment must be seen in the light of their struggle to participate on an equal footing within the English-medium university and in relation to the social and cultural capital already acquired by the multi-racial middle classes (white/Indian and the growing black middle classes). The attitude of lecturers and the lack of social and cultural/language capital is accentuated above in narrating the student’s experience of marginalisation. University academic life accentuates class/race difference and the experience of being a poor black student is aggravated leading to disaffection and exclusions (Jawitz 2012; McKinney 2007). It is no wonder then that UKZN has seen a rise in the number of student protests regarding financial aid and student exclusions.
Competency in English, which is key to student success at UKZN, is linked to class. Black students who are competent in English are part of a growing feature of South African townships where there is mass movement of learners who can afford to pay the fees at ‘multiracial’ schools as they access English-medium schools in former white, Indian and coloured areas.

... I don’t know maybe is the accent. You know sometimes Black people when they speak in English they speak in a certain accent ...

... white and Indian students, they are more outspoken, ... even in class they will be talking all the time, so even if they develop that relationship with the lecturer, it is through talking, they are more vocal.

Black students tend to shy away, maybe it’s a language thing [Group interview, black female].

Relations of domination and subordination are reproduced with the deployment of language as a powerful tool and through which the disadvantaged black student is marginalised. With virtually no desegregation in African schools and limited access to English, particularly for students outside of the urban contexts, power inequalities are reproduced with negative academic outcomes.

**RACE, CLASS AND INTERACTIONS**

Racial mixing and interactions, it has been argued, are important to reduce the ways in which race structures student identities (Durrheim, Trotter, Piper and Manicom 2004; Pattman 2007) but to do that, I argue, it is necessary also to attend to inequalities of power and the microeconomics through which difference is played out. When students spoke of interactions they spoke of demarcations invoking class and histories of separation, the geographies of apartheid and the university as a hub in which racialised space is produced by the actions of students:

... when we sit around on campus we demarcate each other ... by the cantea and the library there is a large amount [sic] of black students and when you come to the park near the vendors you will find a few Indian and coloured and maybe white students ... white students you will find them at the upper caf next to humanities [black male].

Instead of understanding the demarcation noted above in fixed racial terms, racial lines albeit in a very small way were crossed invoking changing class positions. It must be noted here that UKZN has the largest number of students from poor and black working class contexts. Class and race continue to be reflected in the spaces students inhabit. The ‘caf” was constructed as very expensive catering for the middle class/
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elite and the predominance of white students seen there must be seen in this light. Racial demarcation at the ‘caf’ is stamped by class privilege, thereby entrenching distance between students:

... it’s just that it is quite hard for people to interact ... boils down to racism because your attitude towards a white student ... an example of a student who is coming from a deep rural area where you hardly interact with any other race except your own race. There are stereotypes we can’t run away from that there are stereotypes about Indians, about blacks about white students ... to unlearn that takes a very long time ... Now you come to the university you see a white student ... you have never interacted with them before [black male].

When students talk race, they capture the complexity of class and the legacies of apartheid which has consequences for social relations, ‘you have never interacted with them [white] before’. In using the example of a student from rural South Africa, it is possible to understand how large-scale forces cross with the local context of UKZN student lives. It is no fault of students that racial interaction has been limited. There has been virtually no desegregation in African areas with rural areas often being the most afflicted in the country in relation to deep poverty and unemployment. Such areas are and have remained only black. The separation between the rural black student and the white/Indian student is further exacerbated by the urban-rural divide which sees the poor blacks chiefly located in rural South Africa. Thus, history and apartheid’s engineering as well as persistent social and economic inequalities which continue to equate being white with class privilege is played out in university interactions and has consequences for racial separation and distancing:

... the residences in the university it is dominated by black students when black students leave the university the day scholars they live in townships. The white students and Indian students they the Indian students also have their own township ... and you have the white students who live in urban areas the upper class sort of residences. Now if you have individuals interacting only coming to class and listening to the lecturer and going home there is minimal time of socializing and the things that are done in townships are noticeable different to what is done in upper class areas like your La Lucia and Umhlanga ... it is much easier for someone who comes from Umlazi to interact with someone who comes from Chesterville because there are similarities in how the communities interact ... it doesn’t mean it does not happen to easily interact with someone who is from Glenwood, La Lucia ... those places that are highly secured that have you’re up to standard gadgets when it comes to technology and the places that are well off so then the language differs [black male].

Apartheid’s geographies are implicated in preventing and limiting racial crossovers. It ‘doesn’t mean it does not happen to easily interact’ but interactions are limited under historical conditions, and the geographies of apartheid and economic inequalities
continue to impact on race relations at UKZN. The fact that the university residences are all black is testimony to the white/Indian ‘middle class flight’ inhibiting the development of social interactions in this space. The reference to the apartheid designed Durban geography is implicated in the lack of student interactions. La Lucia/Umhlanga/Glenwood whilst changing their racial dynamic as the black and Indian elite move there, remain richer, historically white and English in contrast to Chesterville/Umlazi townships (often referred to as African/black townships) which are home to a majority working class and only black population where the first language is predominantly isiZulu. Race complexly intertwines with class, and has consequences for micro student relations and interactions. Understanding student interactions and their actions is inseparable from and complexly related to micro-differentiations produced by historical factors and over-laden with economic and racial terms:

... events in the university if it is something that has to do with a black person organizing it is rare that you find white students attending it ... but if white students organize their own bash at Billies Bar you will find so many of them enjoying themselves few black students they go there out of invitation and out of the friendship they may have cos some of the black students went to schools with the white students now they know each other so the interaction can only be to that level oh we had a friendship before and now they are at university so it is easy to interact [black male].

Students’ accounts of the local racial tensions and separations are the product of and underpinned by politics, history and inequalities. Class is an important mechanism for cross racial interactions and friendships. Black students who have attended former white fee-paying schools in particular emerge from the black elite and the growing middle class demanding a better education than that available in the townships. This has consequences for how students make race, setting the limit of interactions and producing spaces that are predominantly white and black through their actions.

**THE COFFEE SHOP ELITE AND THE MARKET**

I have argued thus far that it is impossible to strip race of class inequalities. A reductionist understanding of race does no justice to understanding the deeply entrenched forms of inequalities through which race is made. The coffee shop was named as an important site for the constitution of class and thus race patterns, noting the shifts in class and race which impacted on how students congregated on the campus:

Many of the students that are poor in the university we [sic] can’t run away from that are black now they would rather prefer not out of choice but because of their pockets prefer to buy the vetkoekies or whatever cheaper meals ... many of the black students and the Indian students are still struggling but whites and Indian students and a few black students have a
certain class and they are able to afford sitting at the MTB cafeteria also known as the ‘Italian Coffee Shop’ and ordering whatever they want and they are able to have their own sandwich from home because at least they still stay with their parents but the same student who is black who is staying with their parents in the township may not have the resources to make their own sandwich and come to university with that because sometimes they can’t even afford buying bread in the morning [black male].

The ‘Italian coffee shop’ brings power and social inequality to the centre of race. Inhabited by the multi-racial middle class/elites (whites, Indians and a few blacks) it stands in stark contrast to the world of suffering and the precarious economic lives of the African poor/working classes from townships. Marginalised by steep gradients of social and economic inequality, the experiences of the black/poor were juxtaposed and contrasted with the coffee shop experience. Nothing is gained however by lumping race as a homogenous and essentialist group in student experiences at UKZN, as I have shown. The distribution of students attending the coffee shop is a consequence of a historical process and is driven economically. The focus on the coffee shop, with its Italian construction, and upper class contrasts with ‘vetkoekies’ (bread) and cheaper meals associated with working class Indians and the African working class/poor. The coffee shop becomes the face of affluence in the context of brute poverty which affects poor Africans, working class Indians and blacks:

So there would be like those superior black people who think they have everything, they will sit on a certain spot among with all the blacks, the Indians, the whites ... like it’s the spot of the elite, but I don’t go there, I don’t even go to MTB (Memorial Tower Building) I don’t have classes that side but I’ve noticed it’s not just anyone who just goes and sits there [black male].

Sitting at the Italian coffee shop is a statement and exhibition of social power -- a spot for the elite where race crosses over with class eroding essentialist understandings of race and racial separation. The coffee shop can help bring about an understanding of affliction and race as it connects with deeper structures of poverty and inequality through which meanings race and class are configured and bring to an end narrow apartheid definitions of race. Who inhabits the coffee shop links race to larger social structures and history and shows the sharp edges of social inequalities, the materiality of race and the shifts and changes to class/race patterns with the ‘superior black people who think they have everything’ accentuating class differences. As MacDonald (2006) notes, the growth of the black middle class in South Africa, unsettles the association of black and poverty. Moreover, unbridled economic growth in the country as MacDonald adds, legitimates economic inequalities as it bends to the political economy.

Class complicates race. In group discussions students mentioned that Indian students many of whom are Hindu and who practice religious rituals involving fasts which preclude eating non-vegetarian food congregated at ‘Shepstone’.
congregation crosses middle class/elite and working class Indians and food (only vegetarian meals) becomes the cultural/social force that brings rich and poor Indian students together. Without understanding the subtleties and complexities of power, the saliency of social and cultural practices as students congregate in everyday life on campus we may not be able to understand the class shifts, the heterogeneity, the contradictions to race and the emerging class based hostilities. Further, in group discussions students compared the snobby coffee shop with Musgrave (a former white elite suburb in close proximity to UKZN) and in contrast to the café (serving cheap meals) with the ‘market’ – a working class hub involving buses and taxis (16 seated and associated with working class transport). The market as hub stretches and connects the city of Durban to the university and areas of work and mainly working class residential areas. Race and class are connected in how students congregate, not only at the university but in their use of transport systems connecting and contrasting what is seen at the elite coffee shop (the presence of white privilege, middle class Indians, an emerging black elite) and their absence in the market.

Whilst privilege is overwhelmingly white it is clear that the ways in which race is made at the university stretch outside, and are drawn and shaped by class, history and inequality thereby producing hostilities and resentment towards the privileged – both the whites who are in the overwhelming majority, the middle/elite classes of Indian and also those ‘superior blacks who think they have everything’. Without understanding the processes through which the coffee shop is a site of racialised configurations and one that takes into account the complexity of class, there is a risk of seeing race only in static terms and missing the web of power and the slowly changing face of class/race. Some of these links are being established in other work outside of HE, in schools (Dolby 2001; Hunter 2010) and in understanding race and the political economy (MacDonald 2006; Natrass and Seekings 2005; Seekings 2008) although these ideas have yet to be comprehensively imported into studies of race and HE in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Despite the overwhelming ways in which the economic elite remains predominantly white, congregating in areas of wealth, while blacks are mainly afflicted by racial poverty, the idea of race as a monolith is one that does not stand up to evidence. An analysis rooted in the inequalities of class, has an important role to play in attending to simplistic understandings of race and racial transformation. To those who see race as some fixed entity based on essentialist notions of what whites do to blacks and what blacks do to whites, students’ testimonies in the article clearly reject the fallacy of a neat racial border separating students at UKZN. The focus on the specific groupings of black working class students has troubled the somewhat unyielding common sense understandings of race. As Dolby’s (2001, 115) research in South African schooling notes, racial identities cannot be ‘bounded and framed, for they
As has been shown, the interviews with students draw attention to the precipitates of inequalities of power, resonating as they do with the histories/economies of oppression in South Africa, which is deeply material. Students recognise the configuration of race/class dynamics, how they are produced and acted upon, how racial crossovers necessarily implicate class, setting the limits to racial interactions and producing racialised spaces at UKZN. Reflecting critically on race, the students were able to open the category up to relations of marginalisation/privilege enmeshed in South Africa’s historical trajectory, repeated through persistent forms of social and economic inequalities that constrain poor/working class students. Beyond just noting this strong association between race/poverty and inequality, the article provides specific ways in which campus life is experienced and configured which leads to an understanding of how such inequalities are embodied in differential and adverse experiences for many poor/working class students.

However, whilst being working class/poor was mainly associated with black students, the spaces in the cafeteria, for example, were also inhabited by working class Indians, noting therefore a level of hybridity. The coffee shop in contrast to working class was similarly hybridised by the level of movement of superior blacks and Indian elite. ‘Having it tough’ though was overwhelming associated with being poor/working class black particularly those who emerged from township schools. The mix of students at UKZN thus accentuates both class and race differences as ‘superior black students’ and Indians (with first language being English) have been promoted into the hegemonic regime that values English acquisition, and the social and cultural capital necessary for university success (Fataar 2009; Soudien 2001). The effects of race and class, however, are further disaggregated as the coffee shop experience divides Indians in relation to class, also noted in Pattman’s (2007) study and accentuates class and race differences as it does degrees of hybridity. Much of the literature on political economy shows that economic growth in South Africa is increasing the chasm between the elite and the marginalised (Hunter 2010; Natrass and Seekings 2005). At UKZN the ways in which class inequalities are being accentuated have already been seen -- the coffee shop provides a stark example of this complicit in the marginalisation of others including the poorer Indians and the majority poor/working class blacks.

Gaining access to universities in South Africa is prized, with restricted number of places and higher demand for student enrolment leading to public outcries over the criteria that make it difficult for equitable access to universities in the country. Opportunities and scholarships for social redress have attempted to provide access to black working class/poor students into UKZN for example. Beyond access however are the complexities of race and the complications of class. There is need for greater recognition of class differences within HEIs and their heightened significance to race. Through this recognition universities could play a central role in supporting racial justice especially for marginalised groups. Supporting and building on existing research in South Africa (Pattman 2007; Walker 2006), the article adds new
empirical and theoretical insights into class and race formations noting that it is far from a simple answer.

In light of the heavy emphasis that students place on race and class in discussing inequalities of power, what are the implications for a politics of social change at UKZN? How is it possible to bring students together as all the emerging work is pointing to (Pattman 2007)? Pattman states that students should be encouraged to work together on projects focusing on themselves which might be a small step towards racial mixing. There has be a greater effort to bring students together so that they can begin to understand each other, develop dialogue and break the separation built by history and economy. Whilst the former white/Indian schools have seen desegregation, resulting in students having some level of interaction with different races, black schools in the townships/rural contexts have remained all black; thus, these students’ first interaction with students of other races is at the university. Interventions that are designed to invoke racial mixing must consider the context within which it is fostered. The experiences highlighted in the article provide contextual specific information. Programmes and policies aiming to enhance racial mixing must consider the ways in which class and race are intricately connected. The recent announcement that isiZulu will be a compulsory course for all students might go some way to changing relations of domination and marginalisation. However, attempts to promote racial integration will stumble without parallel attempts to undo the persistent forms of social and economic inequalities that reproduce racialised poverty and accentuate class/race divisions within the broader South African context.

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DoE see Department of Education.


