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## Overcoming the Divide: An Interpretive Exploration of Young Black South Africans' Lived Experiences of Upward Mobility in Central South Africa

**Abstract** The institutionalized racism that once subjugated the Black majority during South Africa's apartheid years gave way after 1994 to legislature that aims to bring the country into a new era of egalitarianism. A striking result of this has been the steady flow of young Black people achieving upward mobility and making the transition into the middle- and upper-classes. This article explores young Black South Africans' lived experiences of upward mobility, as well as their efforts to negotiate between separate and often contrasting identities by applying an interpretive sociological framework to their narrative accounts.

**Keywords** Identity; Class; Race; Upward Mobility; Young Professionals; Phenomenology; Narrative Research

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This study's topic of interest is propelled by the striking history that continues to shape young Black South Africans' experiences of upward mobility. Contemporary South Africa, and the social reality of its people, has been marred by a tumultuous history of racial oppression which reached an apex during the apartheid era (1948-1994). As Jeremy Seekings (2008:2) states: "It would be astonishing if post-apartheid South African society was not shaped profoundly by the experience of apartheid, remaining distinctive in terms of the social, political or economic roles played by race." For the majority of South Africa's Black population, upward social mobility remains a dream, and many remain entrenched in appalling levels of inequality. Nonetheless, there is a glimmer of success mirrored in the accomplishments of a number of young Black South Africans who have been able to make use of the opportunities created by transformative policies and achieve upward mobility. It is the "Black Diamonds" and "Buppies" (Black upwardly mobile people belonging to South Africa's emerging middle- and upper-classes) whose narratives are explored in this article.

### Philosophical and Theoretical Points of Departure

The philosophical and theoretical frameworks adopted in the study depart from an ontological standpoint informed by the tenets of constructivist reasoning. As such, the study is firmly rooted in Max Weber's interpretive sociology and its associative duty to achieve what Weber terms *Verstehen*—a truly empathetic understanding of how people subjectively perceive various phenomena

from their own unique perspectives. To achieve this, we were tasked with minimizing the "objective separateness" (Creswell 2007:18) between ourselves and research participants in order to give the readers a first-hand account of what it is like to be a young Black professional who is experiencing upward mobility in the central part of South Africa, namely, Bloemfontein. In epistemological terms, the findings presented in the study are thus considered the result of a collaborative effort between the researchers and the research participants (Guba and Lincoln 2013:40, 87).

In aid of garnering data that will lead to the *Verstehen* espoused in interpretive sociology, the study is informed by interpretive theoretical traditions, particularly Phenomenology, Existential Sociology, and Reflexive Sociology. Of these three schools of thought Phenomenology plays the most distinctive role in the overall conceptualization of the study. The onus of phenomenologically based research is to study the lifeworld, the mundane pre-scientific world of everyday life as it is perceived by individuals. This direct perception of the lifeworld is otherwise referred to as the lived experience (Crotty 1998:78). The study attempts to explore young Black South Africans' lived experiences of upward mobility by focusing predominantly on their subjective perceptions of instances where issues of race, class, and identity feature as part of their narrated experiences.

A second body of theoretical work, Existential Sociology, directs the researcher to pay attention to the importance of human free will and agency in the emergence of social reality (Kotarba 2009:140).

At the forefront of this endeavor is the understanding that at the very core of human agency is the powerful driving force known as “brute being” (Douglas 1977:23). Existential Sociology implores us to reconcile the profound power of human emotion with our experience of the lifeworld and the social reality that emerges from it (Kotarba 2009:146). The study thus acknowledges the idiosyncratic character of the participants' lived experiences as affected by the various emotions that they attribute to different situations in their narratives. The relative importance of accounting for emotions in the study is reflected in the researchers' attempts to obtain thick descriptions, and an approach to data presentation often referred to as “impressionist tales” to convey the emotional tone that characterizes the stories as told by the research participants.

Pierre Bourdieu's Reflexive Sociology also contributes to the body of theoretical work that influences how the study is constructed. Reflexive Sociology attempts to resolve what Bourdieu recognizes as “the debilitating reduction of sociology to either an objectivist physics of material structures or a constructivist phenomenology” (Wacquant 1992:5). Bourdieu describes social research as often being unjustifiably polarized into either structuralist inquiry, which applies quantitative measures of “social physics” to objective social structures, or constructivist inquiry, which probes micro-social phenomena by means of theoretical frameworks such as social phenomenology (Wacquant 1992:7). Bourdieu attempts to develop a “total science” of society that transcends the schism between these two seemingly irreconcilable approaches, and combines them to form a “social praxeology”—a singu-

lar approach that views social reality in two separate yet related “moments” (Wacquant 1992:7).

It was beyond the scope of this study to conduct both a quantitative and a qualitative approach to the lived experience of upward mobility and identity. Bourdieu's appeal to approach social research from two moments, however, remains an important feature in executing this research. Not to overlook the importance of society as existing in the objective order, the researchers compiled a literature review that made use of statistical information regarding significant aspects of South African society that affect upward mobility of young, Black professionals, such as levels of poverty and deprivation, socio-economic status, and the racial division of labor. This, mainly quantitative information included in the literature review, was consequently used as the foundation for identifying facets of the experience of upward mobility that could be explored as having an intersubjective presence in the participants' narratives.

### Identity and Class

#### Identity as an Interpretive Process

The concept of identity plays a key role in exploring the participants' experiences of upward mobility. However, what soon became evident throughout the operationalization for the study is the confusion that reigns from the almost countless academic sources that attempt to touch upon the subject. It is therefore important that the conceptualization of identity that was adopted for the study be discussed. The researchers are concerned primarily

with exploring how a meaningful social reality is constituted through mundane interpretive processes. In the case of this study, identity is considered part and parcel of these mundane social processes. From the interpretive process of identification, we are able to develop a cognitive map of sorts that provides us with the multidimensional knowledge of who we are in relation to other individuals and collectives; and who we are in relation to our positions in social space (Jenkins 2008:5). This interpretation emerges from the dialectic relation between internal subjective processes and external social interaction with others (Jenkins 2008:18).

We use the terms “identity” and “identification” interchangeably. Although these two terms may initially seem to convey two separate concepts, they are in fact rooted in the very same process. For Brubaker and Cooper (2000:14), the term identity implies something that is “real,” an objective truth that is an unquestionable aspect of social reality. The use of “identity” as a noun (which risks reifying identities as essentialist objectifications) should thus be replaced with the term “identification,” which presupposes active social processes (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:14). However, both “identity” and “identification” inevitably run the risk of reification. What matters is not “which” of the two terms we decide to use, but “how” we decide to use them (Jenkins 2008:14). With that being said, this article makes use of both “identity” and “identification” for semantic reasons. Although this maintains the use of identity as a noun, it should always be understood as accompanied and established through the active social process of identification.

#### Class as a Source of Identification

Exploring the lived experience of social mobility and identity requires adopting a theory of class which takes into account the importance of class as a significant form of identification in everyday life. The study therefore makes use of Pierre Bourdieu's culturist definition of social class and stratification. Bourdieu describes society as a “three dimensional social space” where individuals, with similarities in their embodied lifestyles and cultural dispositions, are grouped together to form distinctive social classes (Bottero 2005:148). Rather than viewing social classes as divided by externally imposed objective boundaries, each class is separated from the next by an imaginary line which is best described as “a flame whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface” (Bourdieu 1987:13). In this sense, there are no distinct borders that distinguish one social class from the next. Instead, on either side of the imaginary line that separates social classes we find social positions that differ in terms of the density of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1987:13).

For the structural functionalists, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore (2008), the hierarchical stratification of social classes creates stability in society by ordering occupational positions according to relative importance, and distributing economic and non-economic rewards, such as power and prestige, relative to the skill needed to fulfill the duties of each position. Bourdieu (1987:13) extends upon this structural functionalist position of social stratification and views one's occupational position as playing a prodigious role in serving as an identifiable

trait in the eyes of others. According to Bourdieu, one's occupational position indicates two fundamental attributes to the rest of society. On the one hand, it classifies an individual as having the type of primary qualities deemed necessary to occupy a certain position in the division of labor, such as one's position relative to the means of production; one's life chances relative to the labor market; and the status that is associated with the combination of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital specific to certain social positions (Brubaker 2005:52). On the other hand, one's occupation also indicates the possession of secondary qualities that are determined by the mechanisms that govern access to certain occupations on the basis of criteria such as level of education, age, gender, and race (Brubaker 2005:52).

It is for this reason that occupational status is regarded as the most proficient category for identifying one's social position in contemporary Western society (Crompton 2008:51). Relating this interception of class and identity to the study, the goal became to understand how the research participants identify themselves now that they have achieved a higher social class relative to the peers they grew up with, and how they experience being identified by those people on the basis of their newly achieved class positions. This was achieved by focusing on the participants' interpretations of situations where they may have interacted with others on the basis of their achieved class positions.

### Towards a Class Schema for South Africa

The notion of occupation serving as a routine way of identifying one's social position is a crucial as-

pect in conceptualizing a class schema that is relevant to the South African context. In this respect, the study makes use of a class schema comprising of five South African class categories identified by Jeremy Seekings (2003:17). These categories are defined according to occupation and educational attainment:

- **upper-class (UC):** managers and professionals;
- **semi-professional class (SPC):** teachers and nurses;
- **intermediate class (IC):** routine white-collar, skilled and supervisory;
- **core working class (CWC):** semi-skilled and unskilled workers (except farm and domestic workers);
- **marginal working class (MWC):** farm and domestic workers.

According to Seekings (2003:17), what ultimately sets these classes apart is the level of qualification required for individuals to occupy them. Upper-class occupations, such as lawyers, physicians, and accountants, require at the least a university degree; occupations in the semi-professional class, such as teachers and nurses, usually require a diploma; and for the occupational classes below that, individuals tend to require a high school diploma or less (Seekings 2003:17). This article focuses exclusively on the experiences of young upper-class professionals who have acquired their positions through higher education, and whose parents' or primary caregivers' occupations are found to be lower in the occupational class schema. It is argued here that by acquiring occupations that are higher in the class schema than the occupations of their

parents those who participated in the study have in fact experienced upward social mobility.

## Methodology and Operational Account

### Methodology

Considering that the study's goal is an interpretive understanding of upward mobility and identity, a narrative approach to research is adopted as the primary methodology for data collection and analysis. Narratives customarily serve the purpose of preserving cultural values, and carrying these values forth in the plots of stories. Not only does this allow cultural values to endure, but individuals are able to relate their own values to culturally established ones. This provides the platform from which individuals can develop a meaningful sense of self relative to their connectedness with others and their positions in social space (Lawler 2008:249). When individuals tell stories, whether about themselves or about other people, they inevitably engage in identity practices that reveal aspects of who they are (Lawler 2008:249; Bamberg 2012:102).

The most prominent way in which identities emerge through narratives is when individuals order experienced events into episodes that constitute the plot of their life stories. In doing so, individuals are able to interpret later events in life as linked to earlier ones. Narratives thus indicate a temporal movement of one's life that links the past to the present and the present to the potential future. Every narrated event is thus given purpose as leading to a natural conclusion in one's present situation

(Lawler 2008:250). Narrative research attempts to understand how people define their identities by exploring this temporal space "in terms of what is viewed as changing and remaining the same" (Bamberg 2012:103). Achieving upward mobility through educational attainment is a lengthy process that sees individuals experiencing numerous changes to their lives over a period of time. The view of identity, as situated in narratives that occur over time, thus suits the study particularly well, as it forms the foundation upon which the researchers were able to explore how the participants' identities have emerged during the course of their transition through society's different class groupings.

### Operational Account

Arguably the most crucial aspect to consider when undertaking social research is selecting a research sample that is relevant to meeting the needs of one's study. The study's target population is identified as young Black (African) South Africans between the ages of 18 and 30, who have achieved upward mobility (i.e., acquired professional occupations higher than that of their parents) through educational attainment, and who reside in Central South Africa. The researchers use non-probability sampling in order to draw research participants from the desired target population (Babbie and Mouton 2010:166). More specifically, two forms of non-probability sampling were employed, namely, purposive sampling and snowball sampling.

The data collection phase of the research project involved the use of two methods of interviewing, namely, one-on-one phenomenologically based

interviews and a focus group discussion. The purpose of using both methods is to generate in-depth data that are derived from the participants' own subjective experiences of upward mobility and identification. To achieve this aim, the researchers relied on an interview style aimed at generating an open dialogue that illuminates the interpretation, feelings, and understanding that participants attribute to their lived experiences. The aim was for each participant to determine the course of the dialogue while the researchers merely facilitated the topics of interest during the conversations with the aid of semi-structured interview schedules.

No deception was used at any stage of the research process. From the outset of the project, research participants were made aware of the aims of the study and the subject matter that was to be covered. Participants were also made aware that the interviews were to be audio recorded and that they were required to sign a letter of informed consent indicating their willing participation in the study. Participants were allowed to withdraw statements made during the interviews or remove their contribution from the study altogether. They were also free to exit the research at any time. The researchers took precautions to ensure that there is no identifiable information that could link the recordings, transcripts, and research findings to individual participants (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2011:71). All names presented in the research findings are pseudonyms.

As discussed above, the concept of identity adopted for the study views identity as an interpretive

process that makes it possible to understand who we are relative to our positions in social space, social groups, and other individual selves. According to Jenkins (2008:39), our identities emerge within three interrelated "orders" of experience within the lifeworld, namely, the "interaction order" (our daily interaction with other social actors on the basis of putative roles), the "institutional order" (our interaction with institutions and objectivations such as race, class, etc.), and the "individual" order (our idiosyncratic understanding of who we are). These orders, which typify the way we experience the world, are intersubjectively common to each individual. Therefore, although the participants' experiences within these orders may be unique, the intersubjective nature of these orders makes it possible to explore the participants' narratives by means of applying a common analytical framework.

Michael Bamberg's (2012:103) "narrative practice approach" proves invaluable directives with regard to exploring the participants' experiences of identification within Jenkins' (2008) three orders of experience. Rather than focusing solely on the content of participants' stories, the narrative practice approach turned the researcher's gaze to the interactive process of the interview setting (Bamberg 2012:102). What is of particular interest to researchers employing the narrative practice approach are the various discursive devices participants use to situate their sense of self while in the process of constructing their narratives. According to Bamberg (2012:103), discursive devices, specifically those which individuals use to make sense of their identities in narrative accounts, can be

grouped into three analytic "dimensions," namely, "agency" (words describing the participant as an embodied agent of various roles); "sameness versus difference" (words describing the participants' relation to social groups); and "constancy and change across time" (words used by participants to situate their sense of self in moments that link the past to the present and the present to the possible future). By applying an analytical framework that combines Bamberg's (2012) three dimensions of identity navigation with Jenkins' (2008) three orders of experiencing the lifeworld, it is possible to identify a number of themes from the participants' narratives—themes that paint a rich interpretive picture of their experiences of upward mobility and self- and external identification.

### Presenting the Findings

In order to come as close as possible to producing an empathetic understanding as espoused by interpretive sociology, our presentation of the study's findings features the use of "thick descriptions" to provide a rich account of the research participants' experiences. As argued above, this necessitates including important contextual information such as the social setting, cultural values, and emotional tones that underlie the participants' descriptions of various situations (Ponterotto 2006:540-541). The findings presented here include verbatim quotes from the researchers' interactions with participants, which aim to provide the readers with a glimpse into the subjective sense-making processes that underlie the participants' experiences of upward mobility and identity.

Furthermore, as the epistemological position of the study views knowledge as emerging from a collaboration between researchers and participants, it is important to take into account the researchers' interpretation of narrated events. Making use of an ethnographic approach to research for "impressionist tales" (Van Maanen 1988), the findings also include reflexive notes from the researchers' perspective in an attempt to provide an understanding of how various spoken and unspoken cues inform their interpretation of the participants' narratives. The onus of this article rests on illuminating the often unspoken and lesser known challenges faced by the participants as shared in their conversations with the researchers.

### Perceptions of Racial Isolation

Given South Africa's tumultuous history of racial oppression and continued racial inequality, one of the fundamental goals of the research project is to explore the attitudes and experiences of young and upwardly mobile Black South Africans with regard to racial categorization in everyday life. From the outset of posing the question of what it means to be labeled as a young Black professional, most of the participants expressed a certain degree of bitterness at being categorized as "Black." Ntombi's response, taken from the very early stages of data collection, reveals a sentiment shared by many of the participants in their response to the question of racial categorization:

Can't I just be someone that's working towards a goal?  
Do I have to be a Black student that's upwardly mobile? [Ntombi]

The participants' antipathy towards having their race made salient may well be seen as an attempt to avoid the negative stereotypes that have historically been associated with being categorized as Black in South Africa (Mtose 2011:325-328). However, there is another aspect of racial categorization that emerged during the interviews that uncovers a form of stereotyping that runs much deeper than the superficial wounds caused by typical racist stereotypes. It is the idea that upwardly mobile Black people do not deserve to be regarded as holders of the social positions they worked so hard to achieve. As we shall see, this perception does not necessarily hinge on experiences of explicit racial prejudice, but rather stems from implicit cues in events that could otherwise go unnoticed.

During the interviews a number of the participants frequently made the point of reminding the researchers that they see the world through color-blind eyes, and that they prefer not to classify themselves in racial terms. Keketso is especially adamant to drive this point home a number of times throughout her interviews. However, she also makes it very clear that even though she prefers not to make race a salient aspect of how she interacts with people, the risk of being seen as the "other" in an occupational position that is dominated by Whites remains all too real. Almost every page of the transcribed conversation with Keketso is littered with emotive notes that indicate the humorous outlook she has on life. Yet, when she relates the following story (her mother's warning about thinking too highly of herself), the tone stands out as uncharacteristically serious:

This is what she said to me recently: "Don't forget you're a Black person. It doesn't matter how highly you think of yourself. It doesn't matter how good you are. Those people will still see you as a Black person. So keep that in mind." [Keketso]

Keketso's response is probed in order to understand whether she agrees with her mother's view. Her following response signals just how poignant a role her mother's words played in her perception of how she is viewed by White people in her achieved occupational position:

It's the truth at the end of the day. You can't fight it, it's the truth. It's the reality of where we live. The fact that you're a Black person in the workspace will still come up because that's how you are seen to the rest of the world, you know what I mean?...I could be a workaholic and go crazy here, and be the best attorney in the world, but to everybody else I'll be the best Black attorney, you understand? [Keketso]

However, it is not only the pragmatic knowledge shared by her mother that shapes Keketso's interpretation of her racial identity among Whites, but also her first-hand experiences of what she termed "racist" events when she started working at a predominantly White Afrikaans-speaking law firm:

I've had to adapt to going to these...what we...well, what we as Black people know as racist restaurants and things like that. Or places where you are the only Black person [laughs]. Nowadays there's like a rule. They say you're going here and I say: "OK, how many other Black people are going? None? No, I'm not going." [Keketso]

Although Keketso did not mention anything explicitly racist happening at these "racist restaurants," the mere experience of being singled out on the basis of her race has led her to label and avoid all restaurants where there is the risk of a racist incident occurring as "racist restaurants." This narrative, of avoiding situations where one would be singled out in terms of race, is repeated during the conversation with Charles. The primary difference between Charles and Keketso's stories is that Charles did not experience racial isolation first-hand. Instead, his decision to not attend a similar "racist" function (as Keketso terms it) is based on the experiences of other Black people who have been in a similar situation:

We're having our year end function now on the fifth of December and...We also have a department upstairs, [with] a few African people. And this morning I had to go around with a list of people who's going to attend the function. And all of the non-Whites said they're not going. And I asked them: "Why?! This is my first time I'm going to be with you guys. I don't know what's happening here." They said to me: "No, don't go because you will feel very uncomfortable. The White people mingle with the White people and the Black people mingle with the Black people." So I think at my place of employment I'm...I'm gonna have an incident I just as yet haven't...I'm just waiting for it to happen. [Charles]

As Keketso and Charles' experiences show, the perception of being seen as an outsider does not necessarily have to stem from explicit forms of racial prejudice. Although it may be considered a lingering symptom of decades of racial oppression, the

mere discomfort expressed by Keketso and Charles' peers show how negatively something as mundane as the separation of racial groups at an event may be perceived. Importantly, a situation does not have to be perceived as isolating for the possible phenomenon of racial isolation to exist. Sizwe, for example, tells a story which, according to him, has become a private anecdote among him and his colleagues. The setting of Sizwe's story is a meeting in which their CEO introduced the measures their law firm will be taking to increase its BBBEE<sup>1</sup> exposure in the future:

So we're sitting in the boardroom. Then the CEO, our CEO, mister [X], mentions the fact that I'm the only Black associate...which I was totally oblivious of [laughs]...One of the key things that they're going to focus on in the new year is empowerment. After the meeting, Leon, one of the senior associates, says to me: "Sizwe, I didn't know you were Black" [laughs]. So I turn to him and I say: "Neither did I" [laughs]. [Sizwe]

The stories of racial categorization narrated under this theme differ somewhat in terms of the significance they have for the narrators. For some, being labeled as Black imposes negative stereotypes that are hard to shake off. For others, having their race made salient merely serves to drive home the idea that they will always be considered outsiders in a space that is still dominated by Whites. Even in an instance such as Sizwe's, where the experience

<sup>1</sup> BBBEE is the acronym for Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment, an official part of the current South African government's policy to actively promote progress of Black business and industrial development.

is viewed in a light-hearted way, the fact that he is singled out on the basis of his race during a meeting indicates an exaggerated prevalence of racialism in the participants' everyday lives.

### Managing Differential Class Identities

Because the research participants have achieved upward mobility, they are identified by others on the basis that they own a certain set of qualities that are required to occupy their achieved social positions (Bourdieu 1987:13). The aim is thus to explore the participants' perspectives of how upwardly mobile Black South Africans are categorized by other less fortunate Black South Africans. According to Amohelang, the acquisition of items associated with wealth, such as a luxury German car and a big house (i.e., a lifestyle that sharply contrasts with that of less fortunate Black people still living in poverty), is the underlying cause of the negative connotations associated with successful Black South Africans:

The way things are happening: Everyone...they're living this life of German cars, the mansion, the lifestyle, the everything. And it's quite sad because some people actually...some people lose so much touch with themselves that some don't even go back home or some aren't even proud of who they are...or aren't proud of the homes that they come from. You'll find somebody living in Sandton in a mansion, but then their parents are still living in a small four room house or a shack or whatever. [Amohelang]

However, Piwe's following response emphasizes that estrangement from less fortunate Black people

cannot simply be explained by pointing to a difference in affluence. Instead, the schism between the two classes occurs because those individuals who have achieved upward mobility are seen to have changed in the eyes of those they have "left behind":

I think there are people who portray that. But, they are not sell-outs per se, but people who forget. I think for me, with the connections that I have, with the community and consistently seeing and visiting people...people recognize and they appreciate... But, I think some people tend to have this change of mind. It's like they got a heart transplant and a brain transplant. They are a new person. But, it's not all about that. Even as much as you learn good things from tertiary institutions, you still need to anchor where you come from. So there is a tendency of educated young Blacks to deviate, and completely deviate. [Piwe]

Piwe's perspective is firmly grounded in his own experience of achieving upward mobility and returning to his community of origin. Because of his achievements, Piwe is able to afford the type of class indicators pointed out by Amohelang, such as a BMW and a house which is a tremendous departure from the home he grew up in. Yet, despite clearly having made the transition into a higher social class, Piwe maintains a strong connection with the people in the community where he grew up, and he still identifies strongly with the type of practices that characterize life in South Africa's townships. According to Piwe, the reason why he has not experienced the type of negativity that is present in Amohelang's story is because

by returning to his community on a regular basis, and engaging with the people there in a way that shows his connectedness to them, he is essentially portraying an image of himself that shows that he has not abandoned his origins for something he views as better than what life in the township has to offer. Much like Piwe, James has not encountered any negativity on the basis of being identified as someone who is upwardly mobile. He also speaks of preserving the practices of life in the township:

No, these things happen. But, like I say, these guys who call people "coconuts,"<sup>2</sup> they look at...If I can say it like this. If I go to my friends and they think I have changed, they won't say I am a "coconut." They will just say: "Oh, this guy has changed for whatever reason." This thing of "coconuts" comes in because some Black people start acting like...they don't do the things they used to do when they were still living in the location, you understand? So it's these things of like only doing the White weddings. My friend, Pumla, I told you about earlier, he is only doing the White wedding [not also the traditional wedding]. So for him, people in the location will say he is acting like a "coconut" because why isn't he doing the cultural things, you understand? My grandparents are very cultural and traditional. They will be very heartbroken with me if I do things like that. That is why I did my initiation, you understand? Going to the mountain and that sort of thing. And it is important for me. I did it because I wanted to. I know it is something my people want and what I want in my life. [James]

<sup>2</sup> The term "coconut" is defined in the next paragraph.

The above quote elicits a term that provides valuable insight to the understanding why the experience of estrangement is present in many of the participants' narratives. The term, "coconut," is a term that is commonly used to refer to Black people who act "White" or who adopt White South African values to the detriment of their native culture (Rudwick 2010:55). What is of importance is the idea that once young Black people become upwardly mobile, they are expected to maintain, or at least find a balance between the cultural practices of their social class of origin and the cultural practices of their achieved social class. Yet, it is not enough to merely say that one continues to enact those cultural practices. They are only able to negate the otherwise negative connotations associated with upwardly mobile Black South Africans if they maintain frequent interaction with lower class Black people. This essentially reifies their identity within the community as individuals who do not consider themselves as superior to the people they grew up with, and the culture they were raised in, just because they have achieved a higher class position.

### Expectations of Total Financial Independence

Another theme related to the participants' identification with to their newly achieved class positions is a perceived expectation of affluence from the side of those who the participants grew up with. For James, this expectation is usually experienced as a humorous banter between himself and his old school friends. James suggests that less fortunate people think of wealth and affluence as an automatic result of completing one's degree and

entering a professional occupation. However, as repeatedly shown throughout this theme, the research participants have just started their professional careers and have not had the opportunity to accumulate the type of wealth others have come to expect. For Sizwe, the expectation of wealth is primarily rooted in his parents' expectations of the level of affluence he should have been able to achieve by now. Yet, as Sizwe points out, his occupational title does not necessarily imply the type of economic prosperity his parents associate with his occupation:

I think the biggest thing which I've discussed also with my father is when you come from...you know, it's not a racial thing, but when our parents come from...we're maybe the first generation professionals or the second, but my parents have the expectation that when you say you're training towards becoming an attorney, they're thinking in your first year you will be able to accomplish certain things financially, and that's been one of the biggest things. And it makes you seem like you're incapable of managing your finances, whereas you're really only getting so much. [Sizwe]

Piwe's experience of this expectation is also personified in the frequent requests he gets for "handouts" from both his peers and his parents.

Almost ninety percent of the people that I grew up with have been left behind. There's very few, maybe five out of all the people I met and grew close to, that are successful. And I think it was just from procrastinating. And this thing of "there's still time," you know? So I left a lot of people behind. And some of

them, when you go home, the conversation really... The conversations are very short. Because it's all conversations about what can you give me? Seeing as you're so successful, what can you give me? And there's nothing to give them except to say: "Go to school, or try to do something." You know? They cannot get handouts. Because at this stage, where I am, I also have responsibilities. [Piwe]

The topic of the perception of affluence proves to be a contentious issue among the aforementioned participants. During their conversations with the researchers they often made a concerted effort to recount their experiences of this expectation without portraying themselves in an ungrateful or cold-hearted light. This is especially true of Piwe, who adopted an almost apologetic tone while mentioning having to refuse "handouts" to his parents and his friends. This only serves to cement the researchers' perception that, although the research participants may be labeled as "successful" because of achieving upward mobility, this in no way means that they have the economic resources commonly associated with their occupational positions. This perspective, which is rooted in their stories of "going back home," reflects a tragic juxtaposition in their identities. On the one hand, they are expected by their friends and family to have acquired a certain level of wealth that is simply unrealistic at this early stage of their careers. However, taking into consideration the very real threat of isolation through openly displaying increased wealth, eventually acquiring affluence may mean having to face the risk of alienation if their identities become too far removed from that of their communities.

### Maintaining Tradition

All of the participants mention the presence of African traditionalism in their lives. Yet, for some of the participants, upholding traditionalism is perceived as an implicit expectation carried in the eyes of significant others. A common practice shared by young Black South Africans is to divide their weddings into distinct wedding ceremonies. For example, Piwe and Keketso both discuss having separate weddings that include both the traditional African wedding and the more Westernized "White wedding." At the time of the interview with Piwe, he was in Bloemfontein with his fiancé in search of a wedding dress for their White wedding. The topic of his marriage is thus frequently mentioned during the interview, especially when Piwe discusses his connection with African traditions:

I'm doing a traditional wedding now, and that's why you sometimes hear me referring to my fiancé as my wife. We're married actually traditionally and we're completing it now on the twenty second of November. So we first started with that because we acknowledge our family, and we told them: "Listen, we're doing this because of you. We're showing you, guys, that we are no different. We're both doctors, but there's nothing...you raised us and made sacrifices, and we're acknowledging it." So we're doing that. And then next year for our friends and people we met at varsity, like professors, lecturers, people who are studying and working, we're inviting them to our celebration. Our White wedding. So we're still maintaining that. Our roots are still rooted. [Piwe]

In both Piwe and Keketso's stories, they highlight the importance of upholding the traditions their parents hold dear as a sign of respect. At no point do Keketso or Piwe mention that they were forced or coerced into conforming to these rituals. However, the manner in which they narrate their stories of balancing traditional and Western traditions indicates that it is a powerful expectation, even if implicitly reinforced. The topic of traditionalism prompts James to recount a story that emphasizes the continuing relevance of African traditions in contemporary South Africa, and how in certain contexts Black people are required to negotiate between Western and traditional ideals:

I know this guy who bought a new house and he wanted to slaughter a sheep there. It's like a blessing, you see? When you slaughter a sheep at your house, it's like you are offering the ancestors...like something to look after the house and keep the people that live there safe. But, there was such a problem there because the neighbors didn't want him to do that there and they were very unhappy with it. He told them beforehand. He didn't just pitch with a sheep [laughs]. But, they said, no, they don't want him to do that there. So he still did the ceremony, but he didn't get to do it at his house like he wanted. I think most Black people still do these things. But, like what I see happening...there are more and more people my age that stop doing what their tradition tells them. And also because a lot of our people go to modern churches that tell them these things are wrong, you see? [James]

Based on the following extract, we were led to believe that the notion of respect for one's family plays a significant role in James' understanding of

the continued practice of African traditions as an important expectation to adhere to:

My grandparents are very cultural and traditional. They will be very heartbroken with me if I do things like that. That is why I did my initiation, you understand? Going to the mountain and that sort of thing. And it is important for me. I did it because I wanted to. I know it is something my people want and what I want in my life. [James]

A crucial perception raised by James is the idea that contemporary South African Christian churches often frown upon African traditionalism. Although the above statements may be James' personal opinion, they do reflect a degree of incompatibility between African and Western cultures that is especially present in Amohelang's narrative. When Amohelang studied at the University of the Free State, she was increasingly exposed to Christian worship, which did not necessarily feature as part of her upbringing in what she describes as a very traditional Zulu household. As Amohelang began to enact more and more Christian practices at home, she felt that a schism had developed between her and her father. According to Amohelang's following statement, it is the tension between herself and her family that reminds her of the importance of maintaining her traditional roots:

We're very much strictly Zulu at home, and I'm Christian, as well. But, there is that clash between Christianity and culture, but that has been cleared up in my family. There's no more issues. My parents know where I stand in my relationship to God and my Christianity, and they've respected that. And I also

accept that there are certain cultural rules that we need to abide to and entertain. I'll take part in them, I respect them. I never look down on my background or my culture. I never look down on our Zulu culture or ancestors or anything, but I humbly did it for him [her father] to understand that, look, this is the path that I choose, but that does not necessarily mean that I don't respect you, or I won't...Like, for example, if there is a cultural ceremony, I'll go. It's not like I'll stay away or anything. I might just not take part in the finer details of it. [Amohelang]

Amohelang's story emphasizes just how important maintaining African traditionalism is to both her and her parents. For Amohelang, the respect she gives to her parents by participating in different aspects of their Zulu culture allows her to continue practicing aspects of Christianity in the knowledge that she can do so comfortably without having to fear their derision.

#### **Withholding Behavioral Traits Perceived as "Black"**

In the preceding section, the importance of maintaining African traditionalism was raised. However, a narrative theme emerged which emphasizes a level of precariousness experienced by the participants with regard to bringing aspects of African culture into their achieved class positions. During the interviews the research participants frequently made statements that differentiated between "them at work" and "them at home." Initially, the distinction between these two identities might not strike one as a necessarily important theme to explore. After all, there is a certain level of professionalism that is expected in the workplace that requires everyone

to conduct themselves in ways that they would not normally do at home. It was only during the analysis of the interviews that the researchers were struck by Veronica's following statement which, upon reflection, proves to be a turning point in exploring the expectations of others, which the participants view as associated with their achieved class positions:

When I'm at the office, I understand it's very prim and proper and I speak a certain way, but when I get home, I'm very much an African. [Veronica]

The above quote emphasizes something crucial to Veronica's understanding of her social position. According to Veronica, displaying African traits (specifically speaking like an African) in the workplace could be considered as "improper." In essence, within her achieved class position, she perceives an ideology that positions Black South African traits as being inferior to White South African traits. During conversations with Keketso she shares the following story, which sheds light on the perceived contradiction between Black and White South African cultures, and the perceived superiority of White over Black cultural traits:

As an example with the Sotho women, you know, they wear shoeshoe's. It's our cultural dress...It's a material. To us, the SeSothos, you wear that on special occasions. You don't just wear it every day. It's your traditional outfit. Whereas here they won't be so accepting. In fact, one of the partners made a comment...they think it's clothes that are just worn by maids. They're like [in an Afrikaans accent]: "Oh, what are you going to do? Clean?" And you're like: "Dude, no! Just because the people that have them in your life happen

to be your cleaners does not mean it's something that they specifically wear." You'll go to an African wedding, or a Black wedding, and I promise you, everybody will be in their traditional outfit. [Keketso]

In this story, the contradiction between White and Black cultural values is clear in the older White partner's misunderstanding of the cultural significance of shoeshoe fabric and style. Although he might not necessarily have intended to explicitly make this cultural dress the object of inferiority by referring to it as something "just worn by maids," he invariably did so in Keketso's eyes. South Africa's middle- and upper-classes have historically been reserved for the White minority. It has only been 20 years since the first democratic elections opened the doors to upward mobility, and the culture perpetuated in the middle- and upper-class is still perceived by the participants as "White." This "White culture" is interpreted as contradicting and even condescending towards those traits characteristic of Black South Africans. This creates an environment of interaction where the participants, upon entering this social space, are expected to leave their Africanism at the door, so to speak.

#### **Conclusion**

The emergence of successful young Black South Africans is a theme that has been covered numerous times in newspaper articles and television shows. South Africans frequently read about or hear the term "Black Diamonds" without putting much thought to the effort it took many of these young Black people to achieve what they have. In the research participants' narratives is an intense sense



of pride at having achieved their positions. Not because they are a minority among the Black population, but because of the obstacles they perceive as unfairly stacked against them.

The section on categorization illuminates a shared perception that young Black people are faced with much more than remnants of racial inequality. The fact that they have achieved upward mobility means that they often find themselves in a no-man's-land between White and Black people. Acceptance in either of these groups hinges on their ability to find a balance between indicators of belonging to both worlds. Underlying this balancing act is a profound longing for the freedom to define themselves without having to navigate the negativity that comes with external categorization. Yet, despite seeing themselves as traversing a tightrope of negative categorization, there is a strong sense of group identification that is constructed on the need to help to uplift those young Black South Africans who have been less fortunate than themselves. And although they often discuss the misfortunes of other successful Black people who have been scorned by their communities of origin, the participants narrate a strong sense of solidarity with other Black people, a solidarity based on their understanding of the skewed nature of racial inequality in South Africa.

The participants' longing to identify themselves on their own terms also plays a significant role in their narratives as a powerful source of inspiration for their will to succeed. The vehement recall that *you're not defined by your circumstances* shines through as a desperate cry to remove the association with poverty that was imposed on Black South Africans

during the apartheid era. This narrative theme becomes more and more boisterous as the participants recount their interpretation of young Black people who fail to take hold of the opportunities given to them by the state.

We are constantly reminded that there is much at stake for these participants. Although they do not explicitly state the importance of cultural capital, the participants' narratives shed light on an implicit understanding that upward mobility is greatly affected by access to the cultural capital legitimated by White South Africans. However, the delicate balance between living with a foothold in two different class conditions shines through as they describe the pitfalls of displaying the wrong kind of cultural competence in the wrong context. On the one hand, their achieved class positions require them to stifle any semblance of their class of origin, for example, through the perceived need to not act "ghetto" or "African." On the other hand, they feel that there is an expectation to adhere to the practices of their class or origin or else face the risk of alienation from their roots, their families, and communities.

The importance of finding a healthy balance between two worlds seems to flow over into the participants' very own sense of self. Despite achieving so much more than most young Black South Africans dream of, the participants' perceptions of their class identities are narrated in such a way that the concept of change sometimes feels like a taboo. Even in instances where the participants convey a sense of self that illuminates the perception of belonging to a higher social class, they always do so in a manner that highlights their connection to their class of origin.

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