

Chapter 5

Who are the African Corporate Middle Class in Post-apartheid South Africa?

5.1 Introduction

The history of the succession of the rise of different groups of the middle classes demonstrates that the group that benefited from the previous era is not excluded from the current racially based transformational policies. An analysis of the social characteristics of the African corporate middle class demonstrates that the majority of the interviewees belong to the previously middle-class families. Despite this categorisation, the perceptions of their current status and future plans still reveal the contradictory class location.

5.2 Family and educational background of the African corporate middle class

The biographical questionnaire gathered data about the background of the interviewees. Of those who answered, the majority stated that their parents occupied professional, skilled or semi-skilled jobs (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Family background by qualification and occupation

Occupation	Father	Mother
Professional and skilled	9	8
Semi-skilled	3	1
Non-skilled	6	4
Unemployed	-	3

Those classified as holding professional and skilled jobs included ministers of religion, school principals, nurses, teachers and clerks. According to Crankshaw (1994), these are jobs that required a minimum of Standard 8 (Grade 10) under the apartheid regime and could relatively be classified as middle class occupations.

A cross-tabulation of the sample according to the family and educational background acquired by respondents shows that all nine interviewees whose fathers had professional and skilled jobs managed to acquire a formal education (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2 Respondents' educational background and fathers' occupation

Respondents	Fathers' Occupation		
	Professional	Semi-skilled	Non-skilled
Formal education	9	1	2
Trade Union	0	2	4
Total	9	3	6

However, there were those whose fathers had semi-skilled and non-skilled jobs who also managed to get formal education. There is no one whose father had formal education and came through the labour movement. This trend can also be identified if one performs a similar analysis for the mothers of respondents (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Respondents' educational background and mothers' occupation

Respondents	Mothers' Occupation			
	Professional	Semi-skilled	Non-skilled	Unemployed
Formal education	8	2	1	1
Trade Union	0	1	3	2
Total	8	3	4	3

Given the fact that the average age of the sample was 39,²⁰ one can safely argue that the majority of the members of the African corporate middle class interviewed for this study were the children of families that would have been regarded as the African middle class in the 1980s.

Those who had semi-skilled jobs included clerks, security guards and machine operators. This is followed by those whose parents occupied non-skilled positions. Tables 5.2 and 5.3 show that those whose parents occupied semi-skilled positions were in minority. Furthermore, the category of the unemployed included housewives and those who had never had employment. The people in this category were women. None of the interviewees' fathers were unemployed.

The above tables provide sufficient evidence to suggest that access to the benefits of race-based policies favours those who are ready to grasp the opportunities. It also suggests that those with formal education, whose family backgrounds can be regarded as middle class, are most likely to gain access to race-based transformation policies. A similar observation is made by Wilson (1987) in his argument that the race-based policies in the United States of America seem to benefit those who are well-positioned to take up positions, at the expense of the "truly disadvantaged".

However, the fact that the sample comprised people with trade union backgrounds provides an insight into both access and the current position of the African corporate middle class as a unit of analysis.

5.3 Access to race-based policies

Those whose access to BBBEE-related policies depended on the training they got from the labour movement in the 1980s and early 1990s described their history as follows:

²⁰ This means that most of the interviewees were in their late teens or early 20s in the 1980s.

I worked for two years and we went to a national strike... I became a shop steward. I was elected as a national shop steward to facilitate relations between the management and trade unions in [one company]. We were influenced by the political situation of the early 1990s... In 1999 I was employed by [a large trade union] as a negotiator. The industry has a centralised bargaining. I was representing employees in a bargaining council [and] we won about 100-150 cases. That played a major role in my learning. I wanted to change my focus and I was appointed as a HR superintendent in [this] company in 2003 (Jacob, interview, November 2005).

The above quote indicates the strong agency of the interviewee. This is supported by the following interviewee:

I worked myself up. I believe in hard work. Give any individual support, he/she will perform. I never had money, but the labour movement had a major role in my development. I studied labour issues at Urban Training Project (Josias, interview, September 2005).

Nonetheless, the following quotation indicates co-option by management:

I was hired from the gate as a labourer and I ended up studying and [was] identified by the personnel manager [as suitable for a management job]. Also, I was co-opted in 1994 because I was a shop steward and I became a personnel manager until today (Solly, interview, November 2005).

Although the interviewees' experiences differ, there was consensus among them that much depended on an individual's willingness to make progress in life. Although they were aware of the fact that BEE played a major role in facilitating their advancement in the workplace, almost all the interviewees believe that it was also due to hard work. This is expressed more clearly by those who acquired their educational qualifications before they were employed in their positions:

I had to show my bosses and managers what I want to do in life. I had to work hard to be where I am... You only have to show your boss that you want to do the job... I had to fight. Like I said, it had never being easy. I mean, there were times when I fought with all my managers and my colleagues. So, perseverance is very important. If you don't [persevere], there is gonna be a problem (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

It was through promotions. I joined the company in 1993 through Graduate Recruitment Programme in my 30s and [was] put into a student position. I took two years to be in a general management position. I moved up quite quickly (Chris, interview, September, 2005).

These quotes indicate not only diverse answers about black advancement (access to training, co-option, less deserved reception in the workplace), but also the

value the African corporate middle class attaches to hard work. The latter seems to signal that there is an emergence of an attitude identified by Terreblanche (2005) about the behaviour of the middle class – that they are arrogant, thinking that they are smarter and endowed with more talent than the less fortunate. However, this becomes different when one considers the fact that the majority would prefer to identify with the working class, their community and ordinary people.

This is shown in the answers on whether or not the interviewees regarded themselves as the middle class. Although they were conscious of the fact that their occupations and incomes qualified them to be called middle class, the majority of the interviewees had reservations about their classification as middle class. It should be mentioned that the majority of those who totally disagreed with the status of middle class were the ones who had a trade union background:

I'm a human being. I'm actually a black person, but except that, I'm a black person who has not forgotten about the people who have helped me. But, God has helped me all my life to accumulate whatever I have. And I remain humble (Kobane, interview, November 2005).

This interviewee had no union background, and did not indicate his educational background in the interview schedule. It seems the most important thing for him was that he “is a black person”. This indicates that there is doubt about the middle-class classification because there are different social dynamics between black and white people. However, those with union background put it thus:

I am a basic person. I interact with everybody, managers, directors, [and] workers on the shop floor. I cannot divorce [workers] because I am from them and they are all my friends (Solly, interview, November 2005).

I'm not in the middle class. It's difficult for me to mingle with other managers when there are closing parties here. I'm used to be with [shop-floor] workers. And, I'm always with them (Thabang, interview, November 2005).

Trade union background seems to be very important, as it results in his socialisation being different from that of other managers. Nonetheless, Jacob sees it this way:

I don't classify myself as a middle class. I live a layman's life. I'm accessible to everyone. I've not changed my lifestyle (Jacob, interview, November 2005).

Although his motives seem to be anchored in the fact that he is coming from the labour movement, Jacob sees his situation as being influenced by his lifestyle. This raises an issue around one's social status. Indeed, although he may be regarded as the middle class, Jacob's social status is different from what one may expect from the middle class. Interestingly, this is not only limited to those with a trade union background. For instance, Kabelo, who has a national diploma and a certificate of management from a business school, and has never involved with a labour movement, puts it thus:

I'm in the working class. I'm an internal businessman. As a businessman, you believe in working and I'll always be a worker. I might be in a middle class financially, but I regard myself as a working class (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

For Julius, the issue is neither the lifestyle nor conceptual misnomer, as Kabelo suggests, but that one's life is different because "black people's life" is different:

I can't say I am the bourgeoisie. You can safely say that I belong to the middle class. It's difficult to actually locate yourself because our way of living is different. You are expected to contribute in your extended families (Julius; interview, September, 2005).

While the above interviewees emphatically deny classifying themselves as members of the middle class, some interviewees agreed with this classification, but qualified it differently:

Yes [I'm the middle class because] I live in Fourways;²¹ my education also allows me to be there. But, in terms of social standing I live like an ordinary person (Makhaya, interview, November 2005).

While he attributed his status as the middle class to his educational qualifications and income, the above interviewee, in line with other interviewees, said that his social standing did not allow him to be in the middle-class category. However, other interviewees saw this differently:

²¹ One of the "middle class" suburbs in northern Johannesburg.

I am the middle class... It is interesting that I can have tea with couple of white guys and they look at me and say 'Here is a liberal ... understanding, all that kind of things. But, deep down I know that I have relatives and families who are staying in areas like *bo Shakung, Mangaung, Mamehlake*, etc., where there is poverty there ... *a hona ditsela there*²² (Josias, interview, October 2005).

The above interviewee, who has a strong union background, clearly indicates a perfect contradictory class location. For him, it is not only about monetary benefits, but also about how white people see him. Indeed, the quote shows that one's position may give one a sense of being in the middle class. But, he says, deep down he knows that his relatives are suffering somewhere in the country.

However, there are those who agree that they can be purely regarded as the middle class. Interestingly, most of these people are those with formal qualifications and whose family background can also be regarded as middle class:

Yes, I think it is fair to classify me as such. There is no one unemployed in my father's family ... no one unemployed in my family. I have a house, car; my wife has a car ... we are relatively well off (Chris, interview, September, 2005).

The above interviewee got his position because he had an MBA and came from a family of educators.

Yes, because I know I'm not a millionaire ... I'm definitely not in the rich category, yet I'm not poor either (Thembi, interview, November 2005).

This interviewee graduated from the university with a BA degree and indicated that her parents were relatively educated.

The interviewees were also asked about their aspirations in the next five years. Almost all of them stated that they would like to see themselves in business. Although some argued that this was not related to their workplace situation, others said that it became difficult for them to continue working for their companies. It is important to note that this was regardless of their educational or family backgrounds. This indicates huge differences between the current compared to the apartheid context. Indeed, it shows that one may argue that the current neo-liberal

²² The words in italics mean "in Shakung, Mangaung, Mamehlake, etc." – areas in North West province and "there are no roads there".

context supports and gives legitimacy to capitalism, at least for the corporate middle class in South Africa.

Drawing from this, one may argue that the freedom in a democratic South Africa grants the corporate middle class opportunities that were not available in South Africa during the apartheid era. This slightly contradicts Southall's (2005: 196) argument that "we should be cautious in rushing to [argue] that the BEE strategy is serving to establish community respect and groundswell legitimacy for capitalism and entrepreneurship among black South Africans".

Nzimande (1991) found that during the apartheid era the black corporate middle class were regarded as the children of domestic workers. Disaggregating the social characteristics of the African corporate middle class interviewed in this study shows that the majority of the individuals were the children of the African middle class. While this shows change in context, further disaggregating of the interviewees' status shows that they struggled with classifying themselves as the middle class. Although the number of the sample is relatively small to make generalisations, one may argue that there is an indication of a change in social context relative to the apartheid regime. Furthermore, it is shown that those who struggle with this social categorisation base their arguments on their social status.

Although few who answered in affirmative based their answers on their income, this seems to be related to the number of dependents interviewees had. The number of dependents for interviewees ranged from 2 to 20 (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2), and the average number of dependents for all interviewees was 5. This means that their income is shared amongst other people in the family and extended families, which could not be identified in the history of the growth of the middle classes of other white groups under colonial and apartheid regimes.

According to Schlemmer (2005), the fact that members of the African middle class struggle to classify themselves as the middle class indicates that they do not have a clear ideological stance. However, the findings in this study show that this

is mostly because of their social status in the society. As it was shown above, an argument about ideological stance is, often than not, underpinned by theoretical conceptualisations attempting to push the middle classes either with the capitalists or the working class. Although it may be fair to argue that those with labour movement backgrounds experience an ideologically contradictory class location, the majority seem to suggest that their attitude is because of the fact that they live with every one; they see themselves as members of a community, basic persons, ordinary persons or black persons.

However, before one can further scrutinise their position in their workplaces and communities, it is important to look at the context in which the implementation of BBBEE occurs. This is a subject for the next chapter.