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“But I know it’s not just that” – narratives of life in South Africa: an inter-generational study of white South African women

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research has been to explore how white, South African women from three generations within specific families (occupying the generational positions of grandmother, mother and daughter respectively) make sense of their racialised and gendered identities in South Africa. More specifically, this research looks at the ways in which race plays out as an aspect of these individuals' narrative identities and whether the awareness of race and privilege shifts across time. These generations are interesting to consider as those in generation one lived under apartheid for most of their lives, those in generation two also lived during apartheid but only as children and young adults, and those in the third generation were born towards the very end of apartheid – members of the so-called 'Born-Free' generation. These generations therefore straddle particular time periods in South African history, and this research considers these in relation to each other. Nine narrative interviews were conducted across four different families to gather data. Five main narrative themes were followed, namely: Non-racialism and Nostalgia; Shame; The Privilege of Feeling Safe; Domestic Work(ers); and Changing Opportunity and Changing Class. A narrative analysis has been conducted on various extracts relating to each of these themes. "But I Know It's Not Just That" (the title of this research) points towards the shift in raced thinking, talk and identities over time, and highlights the generational changes this research considers. This title also hints at the complicated and intricate landscape of our postapartheid world – a world in which not everything has changed, but also not a world where nothing has changed. These micro examples of the experiences and understandings individuals have of Non-racialism and Nostalgia, Shame, The Privilege of Feeling Safe, Domestic Work(ers) and Changing Opportunities and Changing Class provide us with a view of broader society and broader generational changes and similarities in gender positions, as well as raced talk and identities. With this, we are able to begin to answer the question of who white South African women are, how they are (and are not) changing, and how this might impact the future of a postapartheid society.