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A contradictory class location? The African corporate middle class and the burden of race in South Africa

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Abstract

The existing literature on the changing nature of workplaces in South Africa either ignores the role played by the emerging layer of black managers, or views them as essentially conservative or as ‘sell-outs’. This article problematises this perspective in two ways. First, through Eric Olin Wright’s notion of ‘a contradictory class location’, I show that a new middle class social status and power in the workplace is complicated by popular notions of how class and race intersect – both among fellow managers and how they are viewed by the primarily black workforces. Second, I show that the class position of the emerging African corporate middle class is closely linked to the communities that they come from and is influenced by decisions they make in relation to this. By considering how these managers experience living in the ‘suburbs’, we can better understand their contradictory class location and how this relates to issues of race and class. Based on 21 in-depth interviews with African managers in a range of industries, this exploratory study shows that far from just being conservative ‘sell-outs’, the emerging African corporate middle class has constantly to negotiate and re-negotiate its role and identity. It shows that they make different choices which are often informed by their social background. Those who come from a middle-class background tend to cut ties with their former communities, while those who come from working class and trade union backgrounds tend to maintain links with their communities. Indeed, some of these managers still see themselves as being part of the working class.

Introduction

Studies of workplace transformation in South Africa have established that the post-apartheid workplace regime is characterised by discontinuity and continuity. The latter refers to the reincarnation of some apartheid practices in the context brought about by the competing imperatives of the country’s triple transition,

ie, political democratisation, economic liberalisation and the deracialisation of society (Von Holdt 2003, Bezuidenhout 2004, Sallaz 2005, Webster and Von Holdt 2005). While the political and social aspects of the transition serve to facilitate a move towards racial redress in the workplace, global competition coming with economic transition makes it difficult for companies to prioritise racial redress within the workplace. The resultant conflict facilitates the emergence of a workplace regime characterised by continuities with the workplace regime of the past. The reincarnated elements of the apartheid workplace come in the form of the upward floating colour bar, an informal wage colour bar and the maintenance of white managerial domination. This has implications for the occupational mobility of black people. Black managers in the workplace have limited independence and power to perform their duties or challenge the status quo (Von Holdt 2003, Bezuidenhout 2004, Sallaz 2005). Despite these findings, there is little research which directly involves black managers.

Some of the studies referred to above look at how black managers understand their positions and roles in the context of transforming workplaces. Those broadly concerned with this stratum of society, such as Sallaz (2005), take little cognisance of black managers' class location, and how this location is embedded in their communities.¹ This article demonstrates that the reappraisal of the concept of a contradictory class location provides a more nuanced picture of the positions and roles of African managers both in their workplaces and communities. It is shown that while their economic position may qualify them to be in the middle-class category, African managers are barred from the associated influence and social status by the legacy of workplace regime and racial prejudice in South African society. Using interviews conducted with 21 African managers, this article shows that African managers' perceptions of structural obstacles to influence and genuine intermingling in the workplace leads them to assign themselves a political role which is independent of relations of production. It is partly because of this that most of these managers deny a label of the middle class. The latter is also caused by perceptions of African managers that they have limited impact in the workplace and that some perceive themselves as living differently from other racial groups in South African communities. This is particularly the case for those who live in previously white-only areas, since they see differences in their way of living compared to other races. Indeed, a contradictory class location occupied by African managers extends to black communities. While there is a growing consciousness amongst African managers of a need to play a leading role in black communities, most are discouraged by such factors as crime or inability of some members of these communities to improve their own lives.

Managers as part of the middle class

The social categorisation of managers as being part of the middle class is characterised by debates about their location within the capitalist class structure (Nolutshungu 1982, Nzimande 1991, Wright 1997). More often than not, these debates are underpinned by a need to categorise management according to its class interests and class consciousness or ideology within the given system of social stratification, hence the notion of the corporate petty bourgeoisie (Nzimande 1991). The notion of the middle class based only on Marxist notions of 'capitalist relations of production' or 'class struggle' is particularly problematic because of its tendency to reduce the significance of extra-market forces such as race, gender and ethnicity operational in the labour market.

More recently, South African scholars have begun to explore the contradictory nature of class locations, allowing for an understanding of the relationship between class, power and social status as influenced by racial stereotypes embedded in society. For example, in his reflections on the position and role of white trade unionists within black-dominated trade unions, Buhlungu (2006) shows that their affiliation to the dominant race threatened to diminish their contribution within the labour movement. While their ideological inclination was that of the working class, their social status and related power under the apartheid regime put them in a different position in relation to black trade unionists and trade union members.

Following from this, the notion of the corporate middle class, as opposed to the petty bourgeoisie, is adopted here in order to appreciate the nuances of the contradictory class location of African managers within post-apartheid workplaces and communities as underpinned by a need to deracialise the society. Drawing from Wright (1997), it is argued here that black managers' positions can be clearly understood through a combination of Marxist and Weberian perspectives of social stratification.

While the Marxist understanding of class as based on ownership helps us delineate managers as part of the workforce, the Weberian understanding of class as based on market capacities allows us to regard managers as part of the corporate middle class. According to Wright (1997), the petty bourgeoisie are classified with those who own the means of production, while employees are divided into two groups, namely, the middle class and the working class. The differences between these groups can be seen when two dimensions of dividing employees are used, ie, relationship to authority and possession of skills and expertise. The middle class can be separated from the working class in that their possession of scarce skills and expertise gives them a higher position/ better

opportunities in the labour market and that their relationship to authority within the relations of production gives them some autonomy in the workplace. In what he terms 'privileged appropriation location', Wright (1997:22) argues that their position should grant them higher social status and power to stimulate meaningful participation to give effect to the goals of their organisations.

The relevance of the theoretical framework discussed above lies in the fact that it allows us to go beyond the material conditions of a class situation and consider power relations and social status which might not originate from capitalist relations of production. While Wright does not explicitly use his theory of class to analyse racial dimensions of inequality, the intention here is to draw on notions of 'power' and 'status' in order to construct a more nuanced reading of the contradictory class location of black managers in South Africa. Indeed, inasmuch as the class configuration in South Africa is influenced by capitalist relations, it is equally influenced by the history of the ideology of white supremacy and separate development. For instance, although there was an emergence of different African middle-class groups during the dying years of the apartheid regime, these groups were never on an equal footing with the white middle class (Nzimande 1991, Crankshaw 1997, Von Holdt 2003). In his discussion of the apartheid workplace regime, Von Holdt (2003) shows that due to elements such as the racial division of labour, the racial segregation of facilities and the racial structure of power, the power and status of the African corporate middle class was close to non-existent in the workplace (see also Nzimande 1991, Luhabe 2002).

The status of the African middle classes was diminished not only in the workplace, but also in communities where they were based. The influx control and group areas policies ensured that the African middle classes were confined to the working class areas, dominated by the black majority (Worden 1994), which served to affirm their class position as lower compared to that of the white middle classes (Nzimande 1991).

It was this contradictory class location in both the workplace and their communities during the apartheid era that forced the African corporate middle class to strengthen their solidarity with the black working class (Nzimande 1991). Indeed, they were continuously caught between the interests of white capital and those of trade unions in the workplace, on the one hand, and the apartheid state and the liberation movement in their communities, on the other. Despite this, argues Nzimande (1991), they became active in opposing the apartheid regime.

Since it is suggested that being in a managerial position qualifies one to be

categorised as part of the corporate middle class, the research undertaken set out to explore the social status and power of the middle class in both the workplace and communities. In the workplace, I wanted to establish the extent of the influence of African managers on both their projects/subordinates and the company's decision-making. In terms of social status, the research sought to explore the associational patterns of the African managers in relation to both their subordinates and their fellow white managers and how this influences their positions. This analytical lens is extended to communities to look at how these individuals see their positions in formerly white-owned areas and their former communities. Following from this, the project sought to understand the role they play in these two different settings.

Continuity in change in South Africa

The relationship between race and class in South Africa has re-emerged as a key research area amongst scholars (McDonald 2006, Seekings and Nattrass 2005). While some scholars propose a re-evaluation of how we conceptualise 'race' and 'class' as determinants of social stratification (Crankshaw 1997, Tomlinson et al 2003, Beall et al 2002),² others argue that we must be cautious in assuming the disappearance of apartheid's social dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. According to Beavon (2004: 265), there is an emergence of 'a form of de-facto apartheid' since there is no genuine intermingling of races in the former whites-only suburbs (see also Beavon 2000). One of the reasons behind this is the fact that most black people move to the newly developed middle-class suburbs at the edge of the cities, while only a few move to the previously white-only suburbs (Beavon 2004). Meanwhile, referring to what they call 'gated communities',³ Beall et al (2002) argue that although residents of different races in middle-class areas share similar fears related to crime and live more or less the same life style, it is easy to identify the racial prejudices lying beneath their apparently similar lives.

Similarly, research (von Holdt 2003, Webster and Von Holdt 2005) shows that although there is an increase in the number of black people occupying managerial positions, it is difficult to conclude that black empowerment-related policies achieve their goals of workplace deracialisation. For instance, the 2004 Employment Equity Commission (EEC) report shows that there has been an increase in number of the previously disadvantaged people in South African workplaces. It shows, too, that the proportion of black people (Africans, Coloureds and Indians) in top management positions increased by 8.4 per cent from 12.7 per cent in 2000 to 21.1 per cent in 2004. The proportion of women increased by 2.7 per cent from 12.4 per cent in 2000 to 15.1 per cent in 2004. The

increase of the proportion of African females is still high at 4.0 per cent compared to Coloureds (0.1 per cent) and Indians (0.3 per cent). Although there is unevenness on the progress of deracialisation in some occupational categories, this trend can also be identified in other occupational categories such as senior management and professional categories (EEC 2004).

However, the studies looking at workplace transformation and its implications for shop-floor workers in the country assert that while one can identify changes in South African workplaces, the perpetuation of some elements of the apartheid workplace regime and the maintenance of white managerial domination makes the position of the African corporate middle class less significant in the workplace. Indeed, the 'upward floating colour bar', when black people are given supervisory and managerial positions which are below the newly-created positions occupied by white managers, undermines the power of African managers since they do not have the authority and power to make decisions on their own and influence their subordinates (Von Holdt 2003, Bezuidenhout 2004).

These studies help us explore the likely consequences of the implementation of black-empowerment policies, but their major limitation is that they fail directly to engage with the experiences of the black middle class. Indeed, little was done to interview black managers concerning their actual class experiences in both their workplaces and communities.

Those few studies which look directly at the experiences of the black corporate middle class are characterised by contradictions about the positions of this class. On the one hand, there are studies that argue that although there are still some difficulties faced by this group of the middle class in the workplace '[they] have clearly made major class transition in terms of economic status and expectations, and are fully incorporated within their class in this sense' (Gibbons 2000:75).

On the other hand, there are studies that identify different groups of the African corporate middle classes,⁴ but also establish that the mere fact that they are the beneficiaries of empowerment-related policies renders their positions less significant. Most remain stagnant in human relations positions meant to link top management and shop-floor workers or the company and the public and are called 'political appointments' and 'incompetent or skill-less' by white and Indian managers (Sitas 2004:835). In addition, they are frustrated by a new generation of black university graduates who, unlike them, have all the necessary requirements to climb the corporate ladder to top management positions and ownership of companies (Sitas 2004).

As a result, these managers are forced to seek alliances with shop-floor workers and the labour movement in order to fight new racial battles in the workplace. According to Sitas (2004), there are indications of an embryonic black racism in the middle strata of the society. While his research helps to illuminate a contradictory class location of black managers in the workplace, its focus is on one strand of black managers, that is, those with union backgrounds.

Method

The main purpose of my research was to look at the position and role of African managers in both the workplace and in their communities. A snowball sampling method was used to select 21 respondents. The interviews were conducted in 2004 and 2005 with individuals in different companies in Gauteng.⁵ In-depth interviews, in which a semi-structured interview schedule was used, were conducted to obtain the required data. Almost all the interviews were conducted at the workplace of the interviewees while a few were conducted at other places preferred by the interviewees.

The use of the technique of in-depth interviews means that the study is interpretive in nature. In other words, the approach taken here was meant to get the perceptions of black managers themselves on their own positions in society. Although the limitations of this approach lie in the fact that it is not exhaustive of all themes one could explore to come up with a conclusive understanding of class position, it gives an indication of the importance of the conceptual framework discussed above. Furthermore, this approach gave me an opportunity to seek clarifications or further information on issues that would not be easy to probe in quantitative research.

While this approach is not necessarily better than any other, it allowed me to be more objective during interviews, since there was a reasonable distance between the interviewees and myself. This was further facilitated by the fact that most respondents seemed to feel comfortable to discuss issues related to transformation with 'a young black researcher'.

The social background of the interviewees

Two groups of the African corporate middle class were identified through the research process – those with formal qualifications and those with trade-union backgrounds.⁶ All those with formal education occupied relatively higher positions (senior management, for example) while most of those with trade-union backgrounds were found to be in middle and supervisory/junior management categories (see Appendix 1). Of all those who responded, all four

respondents at the executive level have formal qualifications. Out of nine respondents in middle management, five have formal qualifications and only one individual with a formal qualification is found in junior management level.

In the 1980s, Nzimande's (1991) sample was dominated by the children of domestic workers. Further disaggregation of the present sample shows that majority of those who answered stated that their parents occupied professional and associate professional occupations (see Table 1).⁷

Table 1: Family background by qualification and occupation

| Occupation | Father | Mother |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| Professional and associate professionals | 9 | 8 |
| Skilled /Semi-skilled | 3 | 1 |
| Unskilled | 6 | 4 |
| Unemployed | - | 3 |

Those classified as holding professional and associate professional jobs included ministers of religion, school principals, nurses, teachers and clerks. These are jobs that required a minimum of Standard 8 (Grade 10) under the apartheid regime and could be classified as middle-class occupations (Crankshaw 1997).

Table 2 shows that all nine interviewees whose fathers had professional and associate professional jobs managed to acquire a formal education (Table 2). This can, however, by no means be generalised and should merely be seen as reflecting the situation of those interviewed for this study.

Table 2: Respondents' educational background and fathers' occupation

| Respondents | Fathers' Occupation | | |
|--------------------|---|-----------------------------|------------------|
| | Professional and assoc. professional | Skilled/Semi-skilled | Unskilled |
| Formal education | 9 | 1 | 2 |
| Trade Union | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 9 | 3 | 6 |

However, there were those whose fathers had semi-skilled and unskilled jobs who also managed to get formal education. There was 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 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Respondents' educational background and mothers' occupation

| Respondents | Mothers' Occupation | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| | Professional and assoc. professional | Semi-skilled | Unskilled | 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 (which means most were in their late teens or early 20s in the 1980s), it can be safely argued that the majority of the members of the African corporate middle class interviewed for this study were the children of families which would have been regarded as middle class in the 1980s.

However, the social categorisation of people is not complete without an understanding of how they see themselves. The respondents were asked whether they regarded themselves as middle class. Despite the fact that they were conscious that their occupations and incomes qualified them to be called the middle class, the majority of the interviewees had reservations about their classification as middle class. Although the majority of those who totally disagreed with the status of the middle class were those who had a trade union background, this denial seems to be more related to the fact that they are 'black':

I am a human being. I'm actually 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, November 2005)⁸

This interviewee had no union background, and did not indicate his educational background in the interview schedule. This suggests that the middle-class classification may be contested on grounds of race. This is echoed by some of those who identify themselves as the middle class because their parents had middle class status and their own educational qualifications and their upward occupational and residential mobility seem to squarely put them within this classification, but is still rejected:

... You can safely argue 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 to your extended families. (Julius, September 2005)

The previous interviewee quoted had a law degree and recently moved from the township to a previously white-only area.

Some of these people argue that the inequality in South Africa has major effect on how they classify themselves:

I'm in the middle class ... It is interesting that I can have tea with a couple of white guys and they look at me and say 'Here is a liberal... understanding, all those 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*.⁹ (Josias, September 2005)

The above respondent, who has a union background, clearly indicated that the situation in two different areas he is straddling affects his class position in a contradictory way. For him, his occupational mobility afforded him the status of the middle class, while simultaneous exposure to poor living conditions of his families led him to question his status as the middle class.

Besides this perceived life style difference, those with a union background add that their background has a major impact on their identification:

I'm a basic person. I interact with everybody, managers, directors, [and] workers on the shop floor. I cannot divorce them because I'm coming from them.... (Thabang, November 2005)

The interviewees were also asked about their aspirations in the next five years. Almost all of them said that they would like to see themselves in business. It is important to note that this was regardless of their family or educational backgrounds. 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. This leads us to consider how the African corporate middle class perceive their positions in the new workplace regime in South Africa.

The African corporate middle class in the workplace

While the positions of managers within the relations of production can be regarded as contradictory, the interviews show that this contradictory location may be different for African managers in South African workplaces. In this section we show that this stems from the fact that although black people are making some inroads in positions previously reserved for whites, the positions are not bestowed with the same or similar authority as during the apartheid era. Rather, black managers' influence is usually on so-called black affairs.

Black affairs: the position of African managers in the workplace

The first question the African managers were asked about their position in the workplace was whether black people get enough opportunities for promotion in the workplace. The overwhelming majority of the respondents argued that affirmative action policies and commitment of some employers to transformation seem to stimulate promotion opportunities for black people. This is further

consolidated by the fact that the majority of the respondents said that there are no differences in remuneration and benefits between black and white people as these are based on seniority and qualifications. There is a belief amongst the interviewees that the gap between black and white people is closing because of the regulatory framework promulgated after 1994. While it may be because of companies' needs to meet their black empowerment targets, some black people earn more than their white counterparts (Thembi, November 2005).

However, one can identify the phenomenon of an upward floating colour bar in the workplace in two ways. In addition to being downgraded, positions are being given different titles or split into two because they are occupied by black people. One respondent put it thus:

[The upward floating colour bar] is still happening and sometimes it is hidden under titles. You find people doing more or less the same thing, but given different titles and, as a result, they won't earn the same salary. (Julius, September 2005)

While the downgrading of positions can be influenced by the operational imperatives of companies, the title change and division of positions into two seems to be influenced by racial stereotypes in the workplace. According to Chris below, although lack of sufficient skills is always used as the reason for downgrading positions, it is surprising that white people are accorded different positions when they come into the workplace:

Always ...always ... whenever they downgrade a position they use training as an excuse. They will always say, now we've found a person, but this person needs a little bit of training ... and experience... I don't know if this reason is valid enough, because I've seen [white] people moving into the same positions without necessary experience, but not being given a training position, but full positions. (Chris, September 2005)

The suggestion here is that there is a lack of trust that black people will perform their duties in a similar way to white people. For instance, Thembi stated:

At some point I was the only black female in the company and there was a time when I felt like I could have done more and [been] given more responsibility. The company could not give me that because I was junior. But there was another white girl who came around the same time with me and she was given more responsibility than I was. (Thembi, November 2005)

However, other respondents argued that the lower social status of the African managers is not just influenced by the existence of unfounded racial stereotypes, as there are differences in performance between black and white people. These

differences can be attributed to the historical and cultural socialisation of black and white people:

...the socialisation and the culturalisation are not the same. You know, we're coming from different backgrounds and for a long time we've got separate educational facilities. Therefore, we were not taught in the same way. The white person comes to the workplace and creates business. They come from a working culture or a business culture and they bring it into the workplace. But most black people come from a culture that is not a working culture, not a business oriented culture...They've been slightly disadvantaged. Even if they go to the same school with whites, their background counts a lot in their disfavour. (Kobane, November 2005)

It is culturally so...As a black person I've been taught about *ubuntu* – the spirit of working together or togetherness. But, a white person had been taught about business. White people come with a perception that nothing is gonna stop them from doing business, while black people are trying to be *capitalists with a soul*,¹⁰ which cannot go away from us. But, the question is how successful are we gonna be in business? (Thapelo, November 2005)

As a result, these interviewees argued that it was sometimes difficult for black managers to draw a line between business and personal issues. This, argues Kobane (November 2005), derives from the fact that there was a tendency for African managers to be creative about company policies.

While this discussion suggests that the lower social status of the African corporate middle class originates from the history of apartheid and social segregation, it is further exacerbated by the existence of informal social networks exclusive to white managers and/or defined by certain cultural bias or 'the big brass ring'. For instance, this is indicated by the fact that although there is a policy framework in place to guide appointments and promotions in the workplace, sometimes proper channels are not followed in recruitment and selection of new employees and promotion to higher occupational positions.

In order to explore the influence of the African corporate middle class, the respondents were asked about the significance of their positions in the workplace. The majority of interviewees said that their participation in production meetings is less significant than that of their white counterparts. The reasons provided for this included the fact that their ideas are unduly criticised, black people are concentrated in the lower positions, and that there were sometimes misunderstandings between black and white people. Since white people were the ones who were mostly chairing the meetings, it became difficult for the majority of black people to meaningfully participate in these meetings.

Some interviewees said their proposals are taken seriously when the issue was related to so-called 'black affairs':

But, I would want our influence to be on business, not on black affairs. Even though I deal with customers and all along I did things that were not black things in this company, I do get calls to discuss black affairs: your BEE, CSR, or whatever. But, then, I suppose that's South Africa for you. (Chris, November 2005)

However, the problem could be partly attributed to the attitudes of some black people in the workplace:

We are not taking care of each other as black people. We end up killing confidence of our fellow black people because you don't have that much independence to think for yourself. (Thapelo, November 2005)

While this indicates that there is a need for solidarity amongst black people in the workplace, some interviewees argue that a person's inability to participate meaningfully in the workplace might be a result of a sense that he/she would be treated badly precisely because there are very few black people in the company.

This discussion suggests that it is difficult to conclude that the African corporate middle class position is accompanied by equivalent social status and power in the workplace. The major question, which the following section grapples with, is what is the role of the African middle class in their different workplaces? Do they, for instance, adopt a subservient role in their workplaces? Or, are they facilitating workplace transformation?

The role of the corporate middle class in the workplace

While the primary role of managers in the workplace is to improve productivity of their companies, the interviews show that African managers' roles are sometimes independent of the relations of production. These roles can be seen when one categorises the responses to the interviewed managers following Goffman's (1961) categories of adaptations to institutions, namely, the converted, the colonised, 'play-it-cool' and intransigent modes of adaptation.¹¹ Based on the question posed regarding their responses of their workplace atmosphere, the roles of African managers in the workplace can be classified into four categories, ie, the converted; the colonised; the 'play-it-cool' managers and the rebels.

As per the interviews, 'the converted' are those who believe in an organisation and do everything in the workplace to get promotions. Found mostly in black empowerment or transforming companies, these individuals tend to express happiness about the atmosphere of their workplaces. The other three categories are mostly found in workplaces that are characterised by a slow pace or a lack

of transformation. In these workplaces, 'the colonised' are those who quickly identify that the way to get promotion is to join the 'big brass ring' – the informal social networks of white management. As Kabelo puts it:

You go and play golf with these guys. You start watching rugby with these guys... And then they'll say 'Ja, this guy is becoming better, he's cool', and whenever they are looking for a person to promote they'll say, 'Here is a right guy, take him'. (Kabelo, September 2005)

The 'play-it-cool' African managers are those who are very critical about the lack or slow pace of transformation in the workplace, but are unable openly to challenge the situation. Consequently, they ensure that they honour their contractual obligations in the workplace.

Compounding the difficulties of African managers in the current workplace is the fact that there are no strong organisations to support their workplace battles. Indeed, although they are aware of the limitations of the labour movement, these respondents turned out to be very critical of trade unions. For instance, one of the respondents, who has a trade union background, puts it thus:

The problem is that unions are involved from the junior level management (supervisors and shop stewards) downwards. However, I don't think there is an impact the labour movement could make because (1) [there is] lack of skills and knowledge [in the labour movement] and (2) its easy to [co-opt] the leadership... we give them five cars to do the so-called running around. They will be doing their own private things, rather than focusing on issues of the employees. (Josias, November 2005)

Those who knew about the Black Management Forum (BMF), an organisation that aims to advance the interests of black managers in the workplace, argued that 'it lacks teeth' in the workplace. Some of these individuals attribute this to its original goals. They argue that although the BMF managed to put forward Affirmative Action (AA) and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies for the transformation of the South African economy, it is difficult for the organisation to follow the implementation of these policies in the workplace. Others argue that it is because the current leadership, including the majority of its membership, has been co-opted into senior management positions without initiating real changes from within.

Finally, 'the rebels' are African managers who openly challenge the *status quo* in their workplaces. These are people who either get higher positions in other departments or ultimately lose their jobs. This is because most white managers in senior positions do not like working with them.

These latter two groups are the ones most likely to leave their jobs and facilitate thus the phenomenon of job-hopping.

According to my interviews, the university-qualified African managers who enter the workplace naively thinking that democracy means there is equality in the workplace, tend to be faced with the challenges of the big brass ring and resistance to transformation. For instance, Kabelo, a 27 year-old African manager who came to the workplace through his engineering degree, argues that he arrived at work thinking that the workplace in South Africa had changed with the advent of democracy. 'Because of the treatment other white managers gave people I regarded as my fathers, I had to choose between my work and values'. 'As a result', he argues, 'I had to face the reality and show my white colleagues that I'm not going to tolerate this'.

This discussion of different responses articulated by African managers in the workplace shows us that the roles of African managers goes beyond relations of production. Indeed, those who are conscious enough choose either to become the play- it-cool or the rebel-type managers. They are also proving to be a major critical voice to both the labour movement and employers in the South African context. The question, therefore, is what their experiences of their status as the middle class in different South African communities has been and how these experiences influence their roles in these communities?

A contradictory class location in communities

It is possible to identify four types of residential areas in South Africa – historically white-only areas ('suburbs' in South African parlance), newly-developed middle-class areas, townships and the one-time homelands. Historically, black people were confined to townships and homelands (Worden 1994). Hence, most of the interviewed managers originate from townships in Gauteng and former homelands (see Appendix 2) but some were raised in historically whites-only areas.

The current democratic context, nonetheless, allows black people to move to any place in the country with none of the constraints imposed by apartheid. Although there are indications that the majority of black people move to newly-developed middle-class areas (Beavon 2004), Appendix 2 shows that the majority of the respondents lived in 'the suburbs', with only three living in the townships. In this section, we discuss the different experiences of African managers in the suburbs, townships, and former homelands. Of particular interest is a growing consciousness amongst African managers of a need to play the role of change agents in the latter two settings.

The position of the African corporate middle class in communities

The major difference between the previously white and the working-class areas is that the former corresponded with the social status and geographic imagination of the middle class associated with the ideology of white supremacy, while the latter was characterised by the social status of the inferiority of the black majority (Worden 1994, Foster 2003).

Those who stay in suburbs expressed the change in their living environment as ‘...strange because we don’t live like in the township’ (Thabang, November 2005) and ‘...because neighbours do not know each other’ (Sharon, October 2005). This is put more clearly by Solly, who felt alienated by the environment:

The place I’m staying right now is too Western. It’s different from the township where you find people coming to your place every now and then [and] people ... knowing each other. (Solly, November 2005)

These responses indicate that while some respondents are less concerned about their environment, others are worried about it. As a result, some amongst these respondents argued that they were trying to initiate ‘*iculture yase kazi*’¹² in their areas:

There seems to be *iculture yase kazi* emerging in this area. We are four black people in the same block and we always visit each other...watch soccer match together and tell each other where we are going for weekends. If I don’t see you on Saturday and you did not tell anyone where you are going, I always call and ask: ‘Hey, man, where are you?’ (Thabang, November 2005)

When we had a house-warming party we went around inviting all of [our neighbours] to the party...I think they were surprised because other neighbours will have a party and never thought of extending their invitations to [all] neighbours. (Thembi, November 2005)

While the ‘suburbs’ environment makes it difficult to know how other people perceive you, some respondents commented on how they thought they were perceived by their neighbours. Although the majority of these people did not think there was a problem of racism in their areas, some felt that the residues of social segregation always come to the fore in their interactions. For instance, one of the respondents told the story about a church where white church-goers would not give them room to sit with them on the same bench. He responded by speaking loudly about the fact that ‘these people don’t want to accommodate black people in church ...Some white people don’t want to change because we allow them to carry on with these old habits’ (Banori, November 2004). Other respondents explained it thus:

You see in South Africa black and white people sit together joking and seem to be doing everything together. But, deep down, we all know that we do not have the respect we all deserve from each other. (Julius, September 2005)

The question about their perceptions of their communities was also posed regarding the townships and the former homelands, where the majority of respondents were based before they moved to cities and suburbs. Those still staying in the townships had diverse answers on this issue.

Some respondents thought that there was no change in terms of how people saw them. Others argued that everyone seem to look upon them as community leaders because they have resources (Barney, November 2004). Meanwhile, others show that they are regarded as wanting to be white (Banori, November 2004)

A number of those living in the suburbs stated that they felt that people expect them to contribute material things to their communities. Mankwe put it thus:

There are lots of hopes and expectations, both in the workplace and home. People look at me with higher expectations in the family. At my house, I get visitors who bring CVs. Because you drive *Pajero*, they think you can provide everything, including work and advice. *Mošimane*,¹³ I play a role of an employer, advisor, counsellor ... everything: You are seen as a [source of] hope. (Mankwe, October 2004)

Nonetheless, there seemed to be a consensus among the respondents that these expectations are related to the high levels of unemployment in black communities. Asked how this affects them directly, most respondents said that:

People are always looking for employment from me...Some people are crying in front of me asking for money to catch a taxi to township. It's tough and sometimes I try to avoid them. (Thabang, November 2005)

This view is echoed by Kabelo, who argues that in addition to people looking for a job from him, whenever there was a problem at home, members of his extended family always came around looking for assistance.

Some, however, take a long-term view on the impact of unemployment on themselves:

It means I can't actually get rich in a short period of time, because I share the money with members of my extended families because they are not working. My clothes that I would be sparing for older age I give away to other people at home. (Kobane, November 2005)

African managers perceive their positions in both the previously white-only

residences and black communities as accompanied by the burden of their race. Indeed, some of these people argue that they felt out of place in their areas of residences and that there are many expectations in their former communities. This should be seen in the context of poor living conditions and high levels of unemployment among black people. How then do black managers respond to these demands from their communities?

The role of African managers in community activities

The respondents were asked whether they were involved in any community activities. Almost all stated that they were unable to participate actively in community activities. The most important reasons cited were that they lived far from their former communities and that the demands of their work leave them little time to be involved in their communities. However, some, the majority of whom do not have trade union backgrounds, made it clear that they would not go back to their former communities because they 'have different values with those people' (Banori, November 2004); 'I struggle to live with those people because of my interpretation of reality, values and views' (Khomani, September 2004); and because 'honestly, townships and rural areas are not safe' (Barney, November 2004).

However, there are those who argued that they always made a contribution to their communities. For instance, one interviewee had an opportunity to run projects in communities, and made sure that his community back home got preferential treatment (Jeffrey, October 2004). Some became involved through their churches. Fewer were involved in government initiatives such as local economic development initiatives (Thembi, November 2005). Nonetheless, there are those who have aspirations of doing something, such as starting competition in schools (Kabelo, interview, September 2005) and giving motivational talks (Eliza, October 2004) in their communities as a way of ploughing back.

One interviewee emphasised the importance of being a role model in one's community:

After 1994, I saw people moving to suburbs and I [decided to] remain back because if we all leave the township, our youth will end up having wrong role models; people who are unemployed but getting money from unclean sources...*makhinza*.¹⁴ (Julius, September 2005)

While another interviewee dismissed the idea of structured community activities altogether:

...I'm little sceptical about so-called community activities because most are meant for CVs. It is a human thing to do, rather than going around and

talking about it...people should [just] do it...it is a call...you are privileged...just do it without ringing a bell about it. I'm part of a family gathering, helping my extended families... everyone... and I don't want any returns. It should not be structured. I do it *an African way* because I'm not in public relations social responsibility. (Josias, September 2005)

This quote suggests that a contribution to community can be done in 'an African way'. Asked whether they were making any contribution to members of their extended families, all respondents answered in the affirmative. In echoing Josias's call, some respondents argued that their contribution was monetary, while others said that they gave information, motivated members of their extended families and formed gatherings. The major reasons given for this are the experiences of suffering on their way to their positions and the spirit of *ubuntu*, which emphasise reciprocity in helping each other. As one interviewee put it:

As a typical black person, I still do a lot. I've got children of my sister, who had passed away, that I'm taking care of. (Kobane, November 2005)

This emphasis on the concern over one's experiences of sufferance and *ubuntu* serves to explain the higher number of dependants of the African corporate middle class. As it is shown by Appendix 1, the average number of the respondents' dependants is five and the highest number of dependants is 20.

However, there are those who seem to be disillusioned about contributions to members of extended families:

But, '*wa bona darkie is ander ding, janong*'.¹⁵ We've got a serious ... serious entitlement problem. We always feel [that] because we are needy... we are entitled to help. I'll teach people from *Ekazi*¹⁶ the work and give them an advice about how to run a contract business ... Aaa ... after three months they will come late, at 9:30, and at 12:00 they will take lunch, take a long walk and lastly they will say ... 'Hey man, help a black brother'. Some of them will come here to ask for money under the impression that they are going to use it functionally, but they'll spend it on their girlfriends. (Kabelo, September 2005)

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 racial social status in the society. As it was shown above, an argument about the ideological stance is, often than not, underpinned by theoretical conceptualisations attempting to push the middle classes either with the capitalist or the working class.

Conclusion

This article explored the position and roles of African managers using Wright's (1997) notion of a contradictory class location, which combines both Marxist and Weberian conceptions of social stratification. While the Marxist conception helped to delineate managers as the corporate middle class, the Weberian conception of social stratification as based on class, power and social stratification made it possible to see the position of African managers as influenced by both their achieved and ascribed status in their workplaces, as well as in their communities.

Although the description of the respondents shows that the majority of the interviewed individuals are the children of parents who belonged to the African middle class during the apartheid era, the majority of them denied classifying themselves as such. This denial derives from the fact that they see their lives as being different from other races and believe that they could not be middle class in a conservative sense because they are black. Interestingly, however, almost all of the interviewees would like to see themselves involved in business in the next few years.

The interviews reveal that in addition to the continuities of the apartheid workplace regime, the African managers' perceived lower social status and less impact in the workplace are further influenced by a lack of trust from their companies. The fact that it is difficult for them to join the informal social networks of power in the workplace shows that the residues of the colour bar still have an impact on social interactions in the democratic South Africa. This is further shown by the fact that these African managers see their influence as more significant in the area of so-called black affairs. The different responses of this stratum to the conditions and atmosphere of the workplace suggest that this class location forces them to play a role that is independent of the relations of production. Perhaps, this begs a question about the extent of this phenomenon in South African workplaces.

The contradictory class location of the interviewees is also demonstrated by an examination of their positions in their communities. What emerges is that their occupational positions make it possible for them to move to residential areas they could not have occupied under apartheid. However, this new space comes with challenges, such as that of socially integrating into their new communities. In response some of the respondents speak of initiating *iculture yase kazi* in their areas.

Furthermore, the consciousness of the harsh living conditions of their brothers, sisters and relatives underpinned by social inequalities, a brunt still

borne mostly by black people in this country, makes them continually question their middle-class status. As such, the majority are overwhelmed by the high expectations of themselves as managers which they see in these communities. This is partly the reason for the significant contributions they make to the members of their extended families. Although this article indicates that there is little these managers could do in African communities, since most no longer live in these communities or because of a lack of time, there is also an indication that some are disillusioned about so-called community activities and/or the contributions they make towards members of their extended families. Nonetheless, there are conflicting views about their relationships with their former communities. While some argue that they intend completely to cut ties with their former communities, others indicate that they are actively engaged in an attempt to uplift these communities.

The question that remains to be answered, however, is whether other members of the emerging black middle class in general negotiate their positions and roles in South Africa in similar ways? Can similar experiences be identified within other strata of the black middle class? If this is the case, it remains to be seen whether the growth of the middle class in South Africa is ironically accompanied by the continued polarisation of society on class or racial lines.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Sallaz (2005).
2. This argument follows observations that, one, there is huge residential mobility of black people not only to the cities, but also to areas previously reserved for whites following the abolition of influx control and group areas legislation in 1986 and 1990 respectively (Kok et al 2003:55); and, two, the fact that there is a growing inequality gap within races. Although different and seemingly conflicting survey tools are used to measure the black middle class (Schlemmer 2005), there is a consensus that a

growth of this class stratum in South Africa is accompanied by the deterioration in the status of the poor in South Africa. According to Beall et al (2002), the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist regimes leads to high returns for the skilled workforce and declining conditions for semi-skilled and unskilled workforce.

3. Although the term seems to be more relevant to enclosed townhouse complexes in suburbs, the authors use it also to refer to communities living in hostels in many South African townships (Beall et al 2002).
4. Sitas (2004) identifies the black corporate middle class as being divided into the 'mobile', the 'stuck' and the 'deteriorating'.
5. See Appendix 1 for list of interviews.
6. Those who acquired their formal qualifications after their involvement with the labour movement are classified as having a trade-union background.
7. Note that the response entries may not calculate equally in all tables due to the unevenness of the respondents in answering questions of a biographical nature.
8. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the respondents.
9. The words in italics mean 'in Shakung, Mangaung, Mamehlake, etc' areas in North West province and 'there are no roads there' in Setswana.
10. This expression was adopted from a presentation by Moeletsi Mbeki (2005) entitled 'A capitalist with a soul: is there such a thing?', at the Black Management Forum annual conference in October 2005.
11. Although these modes of adaptation were established in total institutions, some scholars show that one can identify these in other institutions such as schools, government departments and large corporations (Van Aardt 2002).
12. Township culture.
13. Sepedi word meaning 'boy'.
14. A township slang word meaning gangsters.
15. 'You see a black person is another thing, now'.
16. Township.

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Appendix 1: List of respondents

| Name | Date of interview | Age | Number of Dependants | Management Level | Industry | Sector |
|-----------------|--------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Thabang | Nov. 2005 | 44 | 12 | Junior | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Sharon | Nov. 2005 | 28 | None | Junior | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Thembi | Nov. 2005 | 29 | None | Middle | Consultancy | Private |
| Kobane | Nov. 2005 | 56 | 8 | - | Insurance | Private |
| Thapelo | Nov. 2005 | 30 | 2 | Executive | Sub-contracting | Private |
| Kabelo | Sept. 2005 | 29 | None | Middle | Beverage | Private |
| Godfrey | Oct. 2005 | 43 | 6 | Middle | Auto and parts | Private |
| Makhaya | Nov. 2005 | 43 | 3 | Executive | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Solly | Nov. 2005 | 34 | 3 | Middle | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Jacob | Oct. 2005 | 39 | 2 | - | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Chris | Sept. 2005 | 40 | - | Executive | Automobile manufacturing | Private |
| Julius | Sept. 2005 | 42 | 4 | Executive | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Josias | Sept. 2005 | 47 | 2 | Middle | Automobile manufacturing | Private |
| Banori | Sept. 2004 | - | - | Middle | Energy | Parastatal |
| Paul | Oct. 2004 | - | - | - | Energy | Parastatal |
| Mankwe | Oct. 2004 | 53 | 4 | - | Energy | Parastatal |
| Eliza | Nov. 2004 | 37 | 2 | none | Energy | Parastatal |
| Barney | Nov. 2004 | 40 | 20 | Middle | Steel and engineering | Private |
| Khomani | Sept. 2004 | 30 | - | Junior | Education | Public |
| Jeffrey | Sept. 2004 | 40 | 3 | Middle | Energy | Parastatal |
| Johannes | Nov. 2005 | 43 | - | Middle | Steel & Engineering | Private |

Appendix 2: List of respondents by area of residence

| Name | Township | Suburbs | Province of origin |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Thabang | | Yes | KwaZulu-Natal |
| Sharon | | Yes | North West |
| Thembi | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Kobane | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Thapelo | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Kabelo | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Godfrey | | Yes | Free State |
| Makhaya | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Solly | Yes | | Limpopo |
| Jacob | Yes | | Gauteng |
| Chris | | Yes | Western Cape |
| Julius | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Josias | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Banori | Yes | | KwaZulu-Natal |
| Paul | No answer | - | Limpopo |
| Mankwe | | Yes | Mpumalanga |
| Eliza | | Yes | Gauteng |
| Barney | | Yes | KwaZulu-Natal |
| Khomani | No answer | - | Gauteng |
| Jeffrey | | Yes | Free State |
| Johannes | Yes | | Gauteng |