



Introduction

The Black Middle Class Love and Intimacy

Grace Khunou 

University of South Africa 

There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet which fails so regularly, as love. (Fromm, cited in Lee 1976:401)

Although it has been difficult for researchers to speak with one voice about the conception of class, in particular, Black middle-classness (Khunou 2015), the concept has, however, been important in providing us with a sense of who the Black middle class is and how its members go about their everyday lives. This has been particularly important in South Africa, given the growth of the Black middle class since 1994. Most recently, the anthology, *Black tax: Burden or ubuntu*, edited by Mhlongo (2019), has attempted to unpack the everyday subjective experiences of the South African Black middle class, illustrating how, up to the present time, historical inequality has remained a feature of contemporary Black family experiences. Mhlongo's (2019) anthology also shows how remittances, expectations, and lingering ideas of reciprocal care convolute links between working-class and middle-class family members. Most importantly, studies of class and the Black middle class have been edifying for understanding the language of class (Phadi & Ceruti 2013), precarity (Khunou 2015), and mobility (Krige 2014) and have facilitated an understanding of the political sphere in terms of voting patterns and the contradictory actions of the state (Burger, McAravey & Van der Berg 2015; Southall 2016).

Over and above this, most studies of the Black middle class focus on issues of mobility and on residential areas (Crankshaw

1997, 2008; Krige 2014). This includes the effects of government policy on the growth of the Black middle class and questions of distribution and redistribution (Ndletyana 2014). In 2013, Alexander *et al* published an award-winning study focusing on class experiences in Soweto which illustrates the significance of subjective measures in conceptions of the Black middle class. The chapter by Phadi and Ceruti (2013) foregrounds the compelling idea that subjective conceptions of class-belonging are influenced by one's social network; that is, that individuals define their class position in relation to those with whom they compare themselves. Southall's (2016) interest in the composition and character of the post-apartheid Black middle class also represents a much-needed turning point in social science studies of this group. All of these studies make remarkable and relevant contributions to our understanding of the Black middle class in South Africa.

The particular interest in this volume, however, is the themes of gender and intimacy in relation to the Black middle class. For example, although a study such as Alexander *et al* (2013) makes a relevant and lasting contribution to our comprehension of this class, it fails to foreground gender analysis in elucidations of middle-class experiences. This is true of many other studies of class, such as Ndletyana (2014), Southall (2016), and Melber (2017). These studies foreground the objective measures of middle-classness but do not use middle-classness to examine intimacy or to unpack how societal gendering of experience inevitably genders the middle-class experience. This then makes manifest certain gaps in our knowledge. It is these identified gaps in our knowledge of the Black middle class that have influenced the central issue addressed in this volume: how the Black middle class constitutes and maintains intimate relationships.

The literature on the experiences of Black¹ people in South Africa and Black Africans in particular, is inclined to paint a grim

1 In this book, the term Black is taken from Biko's definition of the Black experience in South Africa and includes those designated Coloured, Indian, and African. As articulated by Gordon (2021:84), this conception was meant to reflect "the reality of their political situation", a situation that has not changed considerably since 1994. This idea is further elaborated in the introductory chapter of *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou *et al*

picture of their lives, including their intimate lives. Studies of intimacy tend to focus exclusively on the challenges of intimate-partner violence (Hunter 2010; Jewkes *et al* 2010) or Black people's inability to marry (Posel, Rudwick & Casale 2011; Rudwick & Posel 2013). The common denominator in these investigations is that they are devoted to gender inequality in the context of intimacy. Specifically, these studies capture the ways in which poverty restricts Black Africans' ability to experience stable intimate relationships and home lives. Accordingly, the question of whether income, education, and professional security create the necessary conditions for stability within the intimate lives of the Black middle-class cohort gives this study impetus and bearing. In other words, the question that is brought to bear here is as follows: To what extent do the material resources that come with the promise of middle-class life sustain the intimate relations of the Black middle class? Given that my previous work on this class reveals that the Black middle-class position is precarious (Khunou 2015a, 2015b), the answer to this question cannot be straightforward. This precarity has been confirmed in other works, including Southall (2016) and, more recently, in the *Black tax* anthology edited by Mhlongo (2019).

In view of Posel *et al*'s (2011) contention that unemployment and underemployment contribute to low marriage rates among Black people, it is worth investigating the Black middle class's experiences of intimacy, both generally and in marriage settings. Given Posel *et al*'s (2011) postulation, does it then follow that marriage rates and perceptions of their intimate relationships by the Black middle class are more stable? The chapters by Kaziboni and by De Mendonca and Khunou provide us with a sense of the experiences of married Black middle-class women. Another question of interest here concerns how the middle-class position influences intimacy – all the chapters in this volume provide some preliminary ideas concerning this question. The ultimate question of interest in this volume is how the stable – or shaky – middle-class position facilitates the firmness or precarity of marriage and intimate relationships for Black people. In a study by Dickson

2019) which emphasises the idea of continued engineering of these categories in the post-colonial state.

and Marsh (2008) in the USA, a certain cohort of the Black middle class is argued to have remained single and childless, suggesting a fruitful line of enquiry regarding whether this phenomenon emerges in the South African context. In this vein, the chapter by Plank focuses on the experiences of single Black middle-class women from Soweto and sheds light on their experiences.

Another important premise in this volume is that, even though class is fundamental in facilitating an understanding of social relations in society, because social relations are dynamic, it is better to examine social life from multiple angles. It is for this reason that the as yet under-researched areas of gender and intimacy in relation to class are used as lenses for exploring the themes encountered in the chapters that follow. In as much as this introduction acknowledges existing thinking and research, it is the contention of this author that theorising should always consider those who are being studied, their context, how they think about their experiences – and how these multiple senses help us reimagine the conceptual frameworks we have used in the past. Such thinking frames how the chapters of this book are presented and the readings of the interview material that are the basis for analysing the key themes presented here.

Notwithstanding the challenges in conceptualising the Black middle class, in this book, both subjective self-identification and objective measures were used to identify the participants for the study and to analyse the findings. Subjective measures include self-identification (Alexander *et al* 2013; Phadi & Ceruti 2011), the location of the neighbourhood in which participants live (Crankshaw 2005; Khunou *et al* 2019; Krige 2012), and their lifestyle and values (Khunou *et al* 2019; Krige 2012). Objective measures that are examined in order to be able to compare the circumstances of participants include income, education, and occupation (Melber 2016). The use of objective or subjective measures alone may be critiqued as being too limited, particularly as the intention in undertaking the analyses in this volume is to provide a comprehensive examination of the experiences of Black middle-classness. This limitation is especially relevant where racial, historical, and/or global comparisons are intended (Khunou *et al* 2019).

In Alexander *et al* (2013), we see the considered use of both subjective and objective measures of class; this is important for addressing the limits of the individual measures. In the chapters in this book, both measures are used. The subjective self-identification measures were used to identify the participants for the studies presented here, and the objective measures to facilitate analysis of findings. Of interest is how, in terms of their income, education, and profession, differentially positioned individuals think about middle-classness and experience everyday life, in particular, love and intimacy.

The studies informing the chapters in this book were undertaken before the Covid-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding this, what emerges from the findings foregrounds some of the issues relating to the socio-economic strain that was a consequence of the pandemic. Given the impact of the pandemic on social, political, and, most importantly, economic life, some of the chapters address how the Black middle-class position shifted as a result, and how this impacted on the precarity of this position – and thus how those who identify as middle class had to redefine their desires and intimate lives.

A Brief Overview of the Chapters in this Volume

The chapters in this volume present evidence from research that illustrate how gender, class, race, and sexuality converge in the making of experiences of intimacy. The first chapter provides a conceptual discussion of middle-classness and intimacy to set the scene for those that follow. The focus of Chapter 1 is shaped by research on the broader themes of intimacy and middle-classness, with a particular interest on the Black middle class.

Chapters 2 to 4 delve into further detail with regard to various challenges related to Black middle-classness, focusing on the complexities and contestations in the intimate lives of women. Of particular interest in these three chapters is that they illustrate the heterogeneity of the experiences of Black women and provide the reader with a glimpse into the dynamics of Black women's lives. For example, in Chapter 2, Kaziboni demonstrates how Black middle-class women in heterosexual marriages

struggle to achieve work, life, and study balance. Furthermore, she reveals that these women experience ambivalence about their professional mobility, particularly because their husbands and society perceive them to be deficient as spouses. These women are perceived in this manner because most of them invest in educational attainment and work success rather than in fulfilling a family role. Kaziboni also grapples with the notion of a double gender standard in terms of which the professional success of women and men is accorded differential meaning as the middle-class mobility of women challenges normative gender roles. The chapter further foregrounds the fact that unmet expectations set by women and men for men to be providers and those set by men and women for women to be homemakers trigger marital conflict.

In Chapter 3, Plank discusses the experiences of single Black middle-class women. Although we see some convergence with the issues Kaziboni examines, the difference here is that singleness is perceived to be problematic, thus marking these women as lacking. Plank looks specifically at the perceptions and experiences of intimacy and middle-classness of single Black middle-class women from Soweto. Plank highlights the contradiction between the promise of class mobility and gendered expectations. She illustrates how Black women must deal with the double standard of patriarchy and capitalism. The findings in this chapter show how the social mobility of Black women leads to challenges in finding a 'suitable' partner. This explains how the conundrum of the patriarchal, capitalist South African context, in which gender roles for men are linked to earning an income and, for women, to nurturing, makes economically mobile women ineligible for intimate association. Plank concludes that, in the context of increasing levels of unemployment for men, the social mobility of women will have long-term implications for marriage and the creation of 'normal' families.

In Chapter 4, De Mendonca and Khunou examine the experiences of married Black middle-class women. Although they echo some of the arguments put forth by Kaziboni, the chapter shows how, in this case, the double standard is experienced when women who earn more than men struggle to provide for the latter. The chapter also illustrates how the breadwinner role, and its

general ascription to men, occasions an identity crisis for high-earning women who also struggle with the idea of providing for their low-income husbands. When high-earning women insist on being supported by their husbands, it raises the question of what the empowerment of women really means. The contexts in which these women find themselves makes it difficult for them to easily assume the provider role as they do not receive the same respect as men do for being high-income earners in their household.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide another interesting dynamic in relation to thinking about intimacy and Black middle-classness. Although, like the first four, these chapters contribute to understanding the dynamics of Black lives, they problematise heteronormativity and Blackness in ways that make novel contributions to the debates. In Chapter 5, Magro examines Black middle-classness and intimacy in cohabiting relationships of Coloured, self-identified middle-class women and men. Magro's main argument concerns how the heterogeneity of experiences of unemployment and income precarity among middle-class couples has the potential to threaten intimacy within a relationship. Furthermore, Magro lays bare how traditional gendered expectations delimit the way in which intimacy is defined. According to Magro, men are expected to provide and women to nurture irrespective of their wage-earning engagements. This tends to lead to gender inequality because women who also work outside the home carry the unequal burden of being both housewife and breadwinner.

In Chapter 6, Scheepers shows how money gives a gendered form to queer relationships. By means of a discussion of the 'top' and 'bottom' phenomenon in gay intimate relationships, Scheepers provides insight into how these intimate relationships follow traditional heterosexual gendering in defining roles in intimacy. Scheepers explains how social mobility and middle-classness contribute to the enactment of these roles. The chapter also showcases how money, an important resource which middle-classness provides, gives partners multiple options and opportunities to express intimacy in a homophobic world.

References

- Alexander P, Ceruti C, Motseke K, Phadi M & Wale K. 2013. *Class in Soweto*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Burger R, McAravey C & Van der Berg S. 2015. The capability threshold: Re-examining the definitions of the middle class in an unequal developing country. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 18(1):89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2016.1251402>
- Crankshaw O. 2022. *How black upward mobility fast-tracked racial desegregation in Johannesburg*. *The Conversation*, 1 February. <https://doi.org/10.36634/RUIG3018,175-177>
- Dickson L & Marsh K. 2008. The Love Jones cohort: A new face of the Black middle class? *Black Women, Gender, and Families*, 2(1):84–105.
- Gordon LR. 2021. A phenomenology of Biko's Black Consciousness. In *Fanon, Phenomenology, and Psychology*. London: Routledge, 221–228. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037132-21>
- Hunter M. 2010. *Love in Time of Aids*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Khunou, G. 2015. *Shaky ground: The challenge of being Black and middle class*. *The Conversation*, 11 May. <https://theconversation.com/shaky-ground-the-challenge-of-being-black-and-middle-class-40723>
- Khunou G, Canham H, Khoza-Shangase, K & Phaswana ED. 2019. Black in the academy: Reframing knowledge, the knower, and knowing. In: G Khunou G, ED Phaswana, K Khoza-Shangase & H Canham (eds.). *Black academic voices: The South African experience*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Krige D. 2012. The changing dynamics of social class, mobility and housing in Black Johannesburg. *Alternation*, 19(1):19–45.
- Lee DJA. 1976. Forbidden colors of love: Patterns of gay love and gay liberation. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1(4):401–418. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v01n04_04
- Melber H. 2016. Introduction. In H Melber (ed). *The rise of Africa's middle class: Myths, realities and critical engagements*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350251168>

Introduction

- Melber H. 2017. *The rise of Africa's middle class*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350251168>
- Mhlongo N (ed). 2019. *Black Tax: Burden or ubuntu?* Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Mkhize N. 2006. African traditions and the social, economic, and moral dimensions of fatherhood. In L Richter & R Morrell (eds). *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa*. Pretoria: HSRC Press, 183–198.
- Ndletyana M. 2014. Middle class in South Africa: Significance, role, and impact. Unpublished paper presented at the BRICS 6th Academic Forum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, March 10.
- Phadi M & Ceruti C. 2011. Multiple meanings of the middle class in Soweto. *South African Sociological Review*, 15(1):88–108.
- Phadi M & Ceruti C. 2013. Models, labels and affordability. In: P Alexander, C Ceruti, K Motseke, M Phadi & K Wale. 2013. *Class in Soweto*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: 142
- Posel D, Rudwick S & Casale D. 2011. Is marriage a dying institution in South Africa? Exploring changes in marriage in the context of ilobolo payments. *Agenda*, 25(1):102–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2011.575589>
- Southall R. 2016. *The new Black middle class in South Africa*. Auckland Park: Jacana.