Chapter 1

Precarious Love in the Black Middle Class: A Conceptual Discussion

Grace Khunou
University of South Africa

Introduction

Race, class, gender, and intimacy have been important concepts in the study of society for centuries. These concepts have made it possible for us to understand social change in a dynamic manner. The adoption of an intersectional perspective in thinking about and studying these concepts in contemporary South African society is important for shedding light on the argument made by Evans (2003) in her book, *Love: An unromantic discussion*, in which she shows how capitalist principles and consumption displace love and intimacy. Evans (2003) argues that love is important in social and in individual terms. In examining love from an intersectional perspective, it becomes clear that intimate relationships do not only concern the individuals involved in the relationship but that these relationships also involve class position, cultural ideas about gender, social roles, sexuality, and race.

The rest of the chapter provides literature pertaining to the themes of the book. The following: theoretical discussion of the themes that make up this volume. These include, the Black middle class; love and Intimacy; Gender, Love and Money; Gender and the middle-class in South Africa and Gender, middle-classness and challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. The intention of this theorising is to illustrate the significance of intesectional analysis in studying the Black middle-class. The theorisation in the following sections is also meant to illustrate the complexities in Black middle-class lives.

The Black Middle Class

Sociological theory teaches that the origins of conceptualisations of class begin with Karl Marx, as captured in his seminal *Das Kapital*, which was originally published in 1867. Many theorists writing in the South African context, including Alexander *et al* (2013), Krige (2012), Ndletyana (2014), Khunou (2015), and Satgar (2018), observe that while the idea of class has advanced since the era in which Marx theorised it, education, societal position, earnings, riches, and ideas about difference and societal resource allocation have remained fundamental to how we conceptualise class. Given the Western origins of the concept of class, some erroneously assume that it is inappropriate in the African context and in relation to Black experience in Africa. The error in this type of thinking is evident in the fact that South African society has been dealing with industrialisation and Western culture for over 350 years. Consequently, as indicated by class theorists writing from South Africa, it is an important concept for understanding socio-economic and political experiences on the continent (Mabandla 2013; Melber 2017; Ndletyana 2014; Phadi & Ceruti 2013; Satgar 2018).

Additionally, the concept of class is important in examining contemporary South African society because the apartheid state and its predecessor thought about and dealt with Black people hierarchically and used a class lens to differentiate them from White people and to allocate and withhold resources from them (Mabandla 2013). Krige (2011) illustrates how class thinking also influenced how Africans conceived of class, and the importance of using it as a marker of differentiation. Mabandla (2013), in his study of the Black middle class in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, shows how cultural differentiation between the Western educated Black people (*amaqobhoka*) and those who held on to tradition (*amaqaba*, or the smeared ones) also influenced conceptions of Black middle-classness. Krige (2011 goes on to suggest caution about how we use class as a concept for interpreting social life; he asserts that interpretations of hierarchical social class without careful contextualisation, as occurred in Brandel-Syrier (1971) conception of the Black middle class's conspicuous consumption, are not useful.

Since Brandel-Syrier's (1971) conspicuous consumption theory, as presented in their analysis of Reeftown, similar conceptions of Black middle-classness have arisen in the South Africa context, many of them, such as the "Black Diamond" study by the Unilever Institute (2008), unfortunately based on market research. These have been critiqued for lazily painting the Black middle class as a homogenous group that blindly engages in conspicuous consumption (Burger *et al* 2015; Nieftagodien & Van der Berg 2007). According to Burger *et al* (2015a), this homogenising of Black middle-class consumption patterns, and the comparison with the White middle class, is based on assumptions of the superiority of the latter and on the immutability of the tastes and preferences of the former.

A recent publication, *Does the Black middle class exist and are we members?* by Khunou *et al* (2019), illustrates how the definition of the Black middle class is a shifting conceptual target. The authors show that the conceptual challenges that occur when working with the construct of the Black middle class are a result of diverse historical contexts into which we read class. Krige (2011), Mabandla (2013), and Satgar (2018) all refer to the significance of context in theorisations of class as well as to how it has been used in the African context. In a discussion of the significance of Marxism in Africa, Satgar (2018:4) argues that Marxism's development in South Africa has allowed for some important "departures, shifts and discontinuities" from the initiating thought, as captured in classical Marxism. To this end, Satgar (2018) shows how Marxism in South Africa has included conceptions of gender and race as important analytical frameworks for examining apartheid and colonialism. It is in this vein that the analyses in this book use the concept of the middle class to analyse the experiences of intimacy of those who self-identify as Black and middle class.

Contextualisation and historicisation are also important for limiting the Black middle-class construct because of the conceptual exclusion that emerges as we study the development of the idea. Mabandla (2013) demonstrates how both early studies of the Black middle class and contemporary ones tend to omit land and property ownership as a framework for defining the Black

middle class. Mabandla argues that to fully comprehend Black middle-classness, land or property ownership, or the lack thereof, are important conceptual factors that coexist alongside education, income, and professional work. In South Africa, the history of land and property ownership and disposition is marred by racial and gender inequality, which still influences contemporary experiences of middle-classness (Mabandla 2013; Ndletyana 2014; Southall, 2016). For example, the Black middle class are forced to pay 'Black tax' (Mhlongo 2019; Ndinga-Kanga 2019) because of a historical wealth deficit and the limits of state social security system and its income provision.

Love and Intimacy

Bhana (2013) writes about how affective relations between Black people are seldom acknowledged in African research and scholarship. This, she argues, is so even though love is transformative, complex, and an important factor in understanding gendered power dynamics. Love or intimacy is an analytical problem "shaped not only by cultural contexts but by material structures of power" (Bhana 2013:4). Intimacy, in the context of this book, concerns more than sexual activity; it entails emotions, connection, autonomy, and myriad other factors, including what Rasool (2013) refers to as ideas of "sticking together through thick and thin". It is the playground for all the complex human emotions.

Intimate relations are social (Bhana 2013; Khunou 2006); they represent an opportunity for emotional and social attachment and for coping with and managing conflicting attachment styles. They also present an opportunity to enact what one observed in one's family of origin, or to construct anew what one lacked there but observed to be normative in the broader community. Intimacy is conceptualised as a sense of closeness (Khunou 2012b), and it is associated with romantic relationships, including marriage (Rasool 2013). In the context of the development of the internet and social media, ideas of closeness need not include the physical presence of the parties involved (Khunou 2012b). In such a context, intimacy can be experienced by individuals who have not met physically, and, in such cases, it thus excludes traditional

notions of physical sexual activity between two people. As societal systems of communication and 'connection' shift, ideas about intimacy also change.

Even though the ideal of love and intimacy is one of stability and living 'happily ever after', the reality is that the experiences thereof are more complex. Khunou (2006:25) argues that "problems, conflict and 'unloving' feelings are a normal part of intimate relationships". Research on intimate partner violence is replete with examples that show how violence may constitute a large part of intimate relationships (Dunkle *et al* 2007; Jewkes *et al* 2010). In her study of help-seeking behaviour by women experiencing violence in their intimate relationships, Rasool (2013) found that certain perceptions of love (for instance, cultural notions that beating is sign of love) play a role in women staying in abusive relationships – and that a change in such perceptions (by deconstructing the idea that being harmed is a sign of love) facilitates the seeking of help by women in such relationships. One of the reasons women in these circumstances seek help is that the levels of love and affection shown by the abusive partner decrease. This is important for understanding how perceptions of love and feelings of affection impact on thinking about abuse and how to handle it. Rasool (2013:60) provides the following as reasons for women staying in an abusive relationship: the abuse does not occur all the time; the abusive partner also shows caring and loving behaviour; the abusive partner declares their love; and the abusive partner apologises and declares their regret for the abusive behaviour. Some of the conflicts found in intimate relationships are gendered and illustrate the dynamic of differential power between women and men.

Love is gendered (Bhana 2013). The ways in which men and women experience and enact love and intimacy are imbued with cultural ideas about the expected behaviours and roles of women and men in their social relations with one another. Where these gender expectations are based on traditional heterosexual ideas, love will be defined using similar norms. In exploring conceptions of intimacy, it is crucial to examine the aspect of gender in intimate relationships, considering that gender plays a major role in how people engage in these relationships (Giddens 1994).

Gender norms in romantic relationships manifest themselves from an early age. This stems from the fact that men and women are socialised differently in relation to love and romantic relationships. For example, men are taught to value money and understand the power of money (Ninsiima *et al* 2018) whereas women are taught to value relationships. Generally, the masculine ideal teaches men to express themselves in essentialised ways (Bhana 2013); this slows or precludes a shift to the construction of egalitarian relationships.

Intimacy is significant in everyday social relations. As a concept, intimacy is important in facilitating our understanding of the links between political, economic, and psycho-social relations and thus how social changes beyond the family affect individuals and social relations. Yet intimacy is vulnerable to structural changes, and the constitution of intimacy in South Africa was transformed by colonialism and apartheid (Hunter 2010). What is currently held to be love or intimacy is colonial love, as it is not free. We see this coloniality of love in how its conception and practices is permeated by capitalist and patriarchal principles. The chapter by Plank briefly addresses how this manifests in ideas about romantic involvement with unemployed men. Similarly, Hunter (2010) illustrates that wage work played a key role in facilitating the shift from the idea of love for love's sake by introducing ideas and practices associating money with intimate relationships.

Gender, Love, and Money

Even though we would like to think about money as an objective phenomenon and not significant in social relationships, research illustrates that there is a palpable entanglement of love and money (Bhana 2013; Khunou 2006, 2012; Zelizer 2005). According to Bhana (2013:6), this meshing involves money being "entangled in feelings, desires and ideals of love". Zelizer (2005) argues that this enmeshing comes about because of how we use money to make social meaning. In this sense, money is also subjective and not merely the neutral tool of exchange neo-classical economists would have us think it is (Khunou 2012a; Zelizer 1994).

Money is therefore a social phenomenon: its use, how it is earned, and with whom and in what conditions it is shared – what Zelizer (1994) refers to as earmarking – are influenced by socio-cultural ideas. This practice of earmarking is influenced by gender relations and has, in turn, an influence on gender relations. When men earn it, it confers a certain type of power to them because of how they are gendered; the same holds for when it is earned by women. That is to say that "money cannot be understood as neutral, since it produces and reproduces social power and social relations" (Khunou 2012a:7).

As love is also social, it is implicated in how we think about money. The societal expectation is that love influences how money is spent and who it is spent on. The flow of money in social relations takes on a gendered trajectory (Khunou 2012a). Money confers more power to men than it does to women. In heterosexual intimate relations men use money to show affection – thus, when they do not have money, the display of affection is constrained. Then again, in accepting the money provided by a lover or husband, the woman inadvertently accepts a host of caring and conjugal responsibilities in relation to the man (Benedict 1982; Khunou 2012a).

In romantic relationships, for example, on the one hand, men are socialised and perceived to be financially strong and thus best suited to be the head of the household. This then influences them to assume entitlement to legitimate power within the relationship (Bhana 2013). On the other hand, women are taught to be the emotional carers in the relationship, while men are constrained from expressing their emotions. As a result, once a relationship ends women tend to blame themselves for failing due to the societal pressures they face to be relationship experts (Giddens 1994; Khunou 2006).

Gender identity remains powerful as regards the way in which money impacts on gender equality in intimate relationships (Tichernor 2005). Gender equality remains important in shaping intimacy even in the context of what Hunter (2010) refers to as the changing political economy and geography of intimacy. According to Hunter (2010:92), this geography refer to "a group of

interconnected trends, including rising unemployment and social inequality, diminishing marriage rates and increasing female mobility". In contemporary South African workplaces, women are assuming positions that were historically assigned to men. Given this, and the fact that more women are educated – coupled with an increasing rate of unemployment for men, especially Black men (Chauke & Khunou 2014) – the resulting rise in romantic tensions makes it difficult for single women and men to engage in intimacy. This is due to the belief that women have appropriated roles that are not theirs. In other words, men believe that women have 'stolen' their jobs and thus their identity as men. Over and above this, the existence of middle-class women challenges traditional conceptions of the position of breadwinner, which is historically associated with men (Khunou 2006). In this manner, single middle-class women face the stigma associated with their being successful (DePaulo & Morris 2005; Fraser 2003; Plank & Khunou 2020).

Industrialisation cemented the idea of men as breadwinners and its link to women's dependence on them (Hunter 2010). This is clearly evident in the extent to which the idea of an unemployed man perturbs Black women, a phenomenon discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. This uneasiness regarding unemployed men is real not only for working class women but also in instances in which middle-class women feel uncomfortable about earning more than men and either hide it or over-compensate by taking on more household work (James 2017; Tichenor 2005).

Hunter (2010) points out that the introduction of money into intimate relationships influenced the way in which these are constituted and maintained. He refers to this as "provider love" (Hunter 2010:44). According to Hunter, provider love is constituted by the expectations emanating from employment of men, the idea of men as providers, and the fact that wage work for men enables them to pay lobola and to build a home. He argues that, in the context of provider love, "men and women looked for some of the same things in a marital partner: if a woman fell in love with a man who had the potential to provide lobola, a man looked for a hardworking and respectful woman who would fulfil her side of the patriarchal bargain" (Hunter 2010:44).

In consonance with Hunter (2010), hooks (1990) claims that, in patriarchal societies, intimate relationships such as those consequent to heterosexual marriages, are based on a system of exchange, the transactions of which are centred in intimacy. According to hooks (1990), exchange politics reduces intimacy to what individuals can get rather than what they can give.

Money plays an integral part in intimate relationships (Khunou 2012; Zelizer 2005). Even though women are increasingly financially empowered, capitalism and patriarchy are intransigent as regards the constitution and sustenance of romantic relationships. Romantic relationships have become more transactional – a give-and-take situation in which women and men are not in a romantic relationship for the sake of love but for what they stand to gain from the romantic association (Gwagwa 1998; Khunou 2012; Zelizer 2005). This is a result of socialisation, in terms of which women and men observe in society, in their own families of origin, in the media, and in their communities, how to act as a man or woman.

Zelizer (2005) argues that, in romantic relationships, gendered norms and traditions shape the value of money. These determine who gives the money and gifts and who receives them and what they do or how they spend the money. In the case where a man has money, women are expected to be humble, to take care of men, nurture men, respect their men, and to be submissive and gentle, especially when they acknowledge that the man is a provider (Zelizer 2005). This demonstrates how intimacy is transactional in gendered ways (Zelizer 2005). According to Evans (2003), this centring of money in intimacy is another way of institutionalising capitalism.

Transactional relationships in contemporary South Africa have been written about in ways that suggest that there has been a break with how heterosexual relationships have been conceived historically. Written works that deal with this subject highlight relationships between older women and younger men – the 'Ben 10' phenomenon (Bradely-Bougard & Matsi-Madolo 2017) – and relationships between younger women and older men – the 'blesser' phenomenon (Makholwa 2018). Although

this literature is useful for illustrating, first, the changing dynamics of intimacy, and, second, the deepening links between capitalism, patriarchy, and social relations, it also demonstrates some discontinuities with patriarchy as we know it, since young women in blesser–blessee relationships often refuse to perform the traditional exchanges (the performance of gendered tasks expected of women) that are generally expected in heterosexual marriage relationships. However, what such work does not attend to is how transactional relationships express a continuity of ideas relating to what it means to be a man or a woman in patriarchal capitalist contexts.

Research on love and intimacy in Africa tend to focus on the pursuit and maintenance of heterosexual unions and/or how these unions break down. For example, a Google Scholar search for 'intimacy' generates references to articles on marriage, cohabitation, and the reduction in the rate of the occurrence of marriage. One must undertake a much deeper, deliberate search to unearth studies focusing on love and intimacy beyond heterosexual unions. This is symptomatic of existing thinking about how love and intimacy should work rather than how it is experienced. To make a worthy contribution to the study of love in Africa, Bhana (2013:6) suggests that it is important to pay particular attention to diverse forms of relations "across the diverse sexual spectrum". This includes the experiences of gay men and lesbian women. Chapter 6 in this volume provides a detailed discussion of the experiences of Black middle-class gay men in relation to intimacy and middle-classness.

Gender and the Middle Class in South Africa

From a gender-relations perspective, one observes a lingering deficit in terms of which patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial ideals of masculinity and femininity remain precarious for Blacks. For instance, Black men are unable to be men and husbands in idealised ways because of high levels of unemployment (Hunter 2006), and Black women are forced to take on the provider role without acknowledgement of their contributions (Gwagwa 1998) or advantages similar to those which this role provides to men (Tichenor 2005). This inability to fully identify as an ideal man

or women as a result of colonialism might be argued to be useful for Blacks as these models of being are dehumanising; however, the reality is that many strive to attain these ideals as they are deeply linked to the socio-economic and political context and conceptions of what is normative.

Acting outside the norm is usually socially and economically punishable and, at times, violent means are used to do so. In the North American context, Lorde (1984) argues that the reasons for such chastisement are ignored by those with the power to see to justice in social institutions, that is, magistrates or other court officials (Khunou 2006). This is so because those acting outside the norm are often objectified. She argues that the norm in the North American context is defined as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society" (Lorde 1984:116). This is similar to the South African context as the power and social trappings conferred by money are not easily accessible by those who do not fit the white, masculine norm. Lorde (1984) goes on to illustrate other distortions of difference that we experience. A few that are of interest in conceptualising middle-classness accurately include those that tend to homogenise the experiences of women, Black people, and heterosexuals.

For example, Lorde (1984:116) demonstrates how ignoring difference, as does the 'sisterhood' argument, "robs women of each other's energy and creative insight". Examining middle-classness in tandem with gender is thus important as it allows us to think about difference in creative ways rather than elide it. The dynamism in Black women's experiences, as illustrated in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5, allows us to see possibilities for thinking heterogeneously about Black women's lives and possibly discover humanising solutions for the various challenges that they face.

Given the ways in which income influences life chances, middle-classness is argued to improve those of individuals and families. However, given the gendered expectations they face, such improvements are differentially experienced by women and men (Plank & Khunou 2020; Tichenor 2005). Importantly,

economic stability, which might also be read to refer to stable intimate relationships and home life, is precarious as opinions on what to spend money on and what to invest in are contested (James 2017). Similarly, Khunou *et al* (2013) and Khunou (2015) argue that the Black middle-class position as a whole is precarious as most members of the Black middle class have an asset deficit due to the social and economic ills of apartheid.

Gender, Middle-Classness and Challenges in Balancing Work and Family Responsibilities

For those in the Black middle-class upward mobility is signified and fuels ambition. Therefore, those who have already entered the Black middle class strive to climb up the corporate ladder once their employment in such professions has been confirmed. To illustrate this, consider the following: A study of the future aspirations of Black middle-class individuals indicated that their goals are related to professional development. Of the sample of 147 participants, (1) 37.0% wanted more senior positions; (2) 29.5% aspired to have their own business; and (3) 8.2% expressed the wish to enter a profession; while the remaining 25.3% wanted to achieve other goals (Ungerer 1999:101). It is evident that members of the Black middle class aspire to grow within their professions. Nevertheless, Seagal (2013) suggests that, noble as these goals are, Black middle-class women struggle to achieve them. This is because women are also expected to spend time taking care of the home – though society does not expect the same from fathers. Often fatherhood is understood as involving the father being the financial provider (Khunou 2006, 2012; Mkhize 2006).

Scholars of the Black middle class agree that education is an integral component of Black middle-class belonging (Chipkin 2012; Khunou 2015b; Mabandla 2015; Melber 2016; Southall 2016). In South Africa, for example, there is a general understanding, as regards both the apartheid and the post-apartheid periods, that the Black middle class is more educated and wealthier than the lower echelons of the working class in the townships (Krige 2011). Much of the privilege enjoyed by the Black middle class in the period before high-apartheid was based on missionary education, which provided entry to professional work (Mabandla 2015).

According to Southall (2016), one of the variables that contributed to the success of the Black middle class, relative to the Black working class, was access to Black tertiary education institutions. That is, education is an important marker of objective conceptions of middle-classness.

The challenges faced by Black middle-class women in balancing work and home responsibilities would not be as problematic as they are if there were gender equality in Black marriages. In South Africa, the equal division of domestic chores is a source of conflict in Black marriages mainly because orthodox gender norms, to the effect that work at home is the responsibility of women alone, are maintained and sustained by both men and women (Seagal 2013). Amato (2010) suggests that even though the wife's contribution to family income can improve a household's financial position, this can also increase her awareness of the problems in a marriage, such as the unequal division of household chores.

However, it is important to note here that not all South African Black families are of the view that a women's place is at home. Research supports the idea that, historically, both South African women and men have worked for wages (Mokoene & Khunou 2019). That is, the fulfilling of the role of financial provider has been the responsibility of both men and women, even when this is not fully acknowledged (Gwagwa 1998; Khunou 2006). Mokoene and Khunou (2019) show that much of the poverty experienced by Black communities has required Black women to seek employment in order to provide for the needs of their family. Such employment often required these women to migrate to distant places, leaving childcare and other domestic responsibilities to grandmother's (Mokoene & Khunou 2019) and extended family members (Bozalek 1999). Even though Mokoene and Khunou's study does not focus on professional Black middle-class women, it helps us get a sense of working women's history and their impact in terms of financial provision to families.

Feminist scholars have argued that families operate as gender mills by means of which hierarchical gender relations are reproduced (Helman & Ratele 2016). In the context of the family,

a variety of discourses can be seen to position men and women in unequal ways. For example, discourses of 'natural mothering', which position women as possessing innate nurturing capacities, can be seen to make women primarily responsible for the care of children (Helman & Ratele 2016). Conversely, men are exempt from caring activities by virtue of their being positioned as providers, protectors, and disciplinarians. Research has documented the ways in which such discourses produce unequal relations within families (Helman & Ratele 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided the reader with a broad snapshot of how the Black middle class has been conceptualised in South Africa and how this interfaces with other ideas, such as gender, race, intimacy, and sexuality. An important idea considered in the chapter is that money is central to how middle-classness is conceived. This idea is important in this book because of how it links with intimacy and ideas of who deserves love and who does nor. The intention of the theorising offered in this chapter is to allow the reader a glimpse of how the chapters that follow are broadly positioned in terms of the themes developed in each.

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