



# Conclusion

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## Introduction

The chapters in this volume provide an important lens for viewing the intimate lives of the Black middle class in South Africa. A major thread running through them is how access to money as made possible by middle-classness and how intimacy influences the life experiences of the women and men interviewed for the various studies that make up this book. The chapters thus shed new light on the complexities of Black lives, intimacy, middle-classness, and issues of gender and money. The main finding presented in each chapter illustrates how middle-classness comes with its own challenges. Although being middle class confers access to opportunities and possibilities for accessing improved life circumstances, it does so in ways that also take away other normative benefits, particularly that of fully challenging and disrupting the norms which are assumed to be a characteristic of middle-classness. This is true for both women and men. For example, even though women gain financial benefits as well as those pertaining to status from their middle-class position, they also face unanticipated challenges which arise from their new identity as high-income earners.

The chapters by Kaziboni and De Mendonca and Khunou illustrate how the high-income earner identity foregrounds the women as breadwinners and the main providers for their families in ways that challenge their expectations of what it means to be a woman. This was particularly true as their husbands did not earn enough and thus could not provide at the same level or more than the women could. Their high earnings did not confer on them the respect that men usually receive as high-income earners.

What the studies also show is that men being unable to earn more than their wives, and thereby failing to fulfil the



socially constructed ideal of masculinity, largely led to normative responses like physical abuse and extra-marital relations and failed to create an opportunity for decolonial love. Some of the men were described as becoming violent in cases in which their wives earned more than they did. Such behaviour indicates that the promise that middle-classness brings comfort does not always ring true.

The book contributes to the study of Black middle-classness and intimacy in three distinct ways. First, it contributes to knowledge of the complexity of Black lives. This shifts the focus from thinking of Black lives and love in terms of poverty and homogenous experience. Second, the book provides information on Black women and heterogeneity, elucidating the dynamism involved in the varied experiences of the women interviewed for chapters 2 to 5. Finally, the last two chapters illustrate a problematic concerning heterogeneity: first, as regards Blackness; and then as regards heteronormativity.

### **Complex Black Lives: Beyond Poverty**

While the authors of the chapters discuss old questions, the book's novel contribution is its reframing of how these questions are addressed. The starting point of this volume involved the question of reimagining Black lives outside the trope of poverty and lack. This was particularly important for framing the questions the studies respond to by allowing for a nuanced reading of intimate relationships beyond the narrative that tells that poverty does not allow for intimacy.

Chapter 1 provided a discussion of existing literature, making the case for thinking about Black lives in a dynamic way by foregrounding the idea of understanding Black intimate lives through an intersectional lens. This then provided the reader with the theoretical basis for the chapters that follow.

The chapters then go on to illustrate a shift in thinking about the Black experience by foregrounding experiences of Black prosperity, ambition, aspiration, success, and complexity. Such complexity is illustrated in how Black women strive to achieve higher levels of education and income in a manner removed from

normative assumptions of the Black woman as a 'gold digger' or 'baby mama', ideas which presume to represent how Black women move in the world.

### **Black Intimacy**

The other important theme of the book is intimacy in the experiences of Black people. As indicated in the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 and throughout the book, love and Blackness in the South African context has not been adequately conceptualised. Recently though, there is a growing interest in studying the intimate lives of Black South Africans outside of the assumption that the assumption that Black people are hypersexual and/or diseased. The chapter by Kaziboni provides an interesting juxtaposition of interviews with the film, *Why did I get married?* – linking the life experiences of the participants in her study to the film allows us to imagine and to read Black love in a nuanced manner that accesses the complexity of Black lives. Similarly, the rich data supplied by Scheepers affords the reader the possibility of comprehending the intimate lives of gay Black middle-class men.

### **Black Women and Heterogeneity**

This book has shown that Black women's lives are dynamic, not only as regards access to resources but also in terms of the complexities and heterogeneity of experience. The experiences of the women in chapters 2 to 5 provide a depiction of singlehood and the Black middle class. Plank illustrates how women grapple with the idea of being single in a context in which they lament the idea of dating unemployed men. Plank shows that these women's laments are the result of their previous experiences of love relationships with unemployed men, who failed to show appreciation for their efforts. In the chapter by De Mendonca and Khunou, the differential experiences of middle-classness shed light on the encounters of married women who struggle with the idea of breadwinning in a context in which being the provider is misaligned with their ideas about their expected role and the expected role of their husbands in their relationships. In these

two chapters, Black women's experiences are differentiated from their peers and family members by the class position and status of being party to an intimate relationship.

### **Troubling Hegemonic Narratives**

The last two chapters in the volume trouble existing normative narratives about questions of race identity, gender and sexuality, and the role of class mobility in making and remaking these norms. In Chapter 5, Magro provides a reading of the experiences of Coloured middle-class couples. Magro foregrounds the problems of homogenous thinking about what it means to be Black. Elsewhere in the chapter, she illustrates the importance of this cohort for addressing earlier studies that involved distortions and inadequate investigation. Magro does a great work reimagining this cohort and addressing homogenising narratives. She illustrates how past injustices continue to influence contemporary social relationships and the identity formation of its members. The chapter makes a much needed contribution to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the broader socio-economic landscape of South Africa, including patterns of social mobility, family dynamics, and community cohesion.

Chapter 6 problematises societal blindness to diversity in experiences of love and intimacy. Scheepers offers a brilliant reading of queer love based on the experiences of gay Black middle-class men in Johannesburg. He addresses the research gap noted by Bhana (2013:6), that "same-sex relations and emotive ties binding people together are often denied and silenced". Scheepers' focus on gay Black middle-class men provides insight into how being a member of the Black middle class benefits – and takes away different things from – different individuals. As illustrated in the chapters by Plank, De Mendonca and Khunou, and Kaziboni, the middle-class position provides status and higher income to women but also removes certain possibilities for intimacy, possibilities which they would have expected to be available. In contrast, with the participants Scheepers interviewed, we see how the middle-class position provides both status and high income as well as giving these men options to

engage in love in more open and public ways than is the case for gay men who do not have the ability to buy security.

### **Intersectionality**

In the initial stages of this project, it became clear that, in order to study complex lives, it is important to recognise that these lives are made and remade as individuals deal with multiple and consecutive issues. Drawing from Lorde's (1984) assertion that "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives", we intentionally mapped out our study objectives, interview schedules and search for participants with a deep awareness of how single-issue research reduces those studied and their social experiences in ways that not only limit what we know about them but also constrains the possibilities for them to overcome the challenges imposed by inequality. While this book does not provide a conclusive unpacking of the intersecting issues to be considered when thinking about the intimate lives of the Black middle class, it lays the foundation for further discussion and research. Some of the themes that have come up here are love, resentment, money, masculinities, women's rights, work-life balance, middle-classness, and aspirations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In illustrating the tensions and challenges experienced by members of the Black middle class in their relationships, this book has provided another important level of complexity to the concept of the middle class. The dynamism illustrated in the varied experiences of women who self-identify as middle class has shown how this class position foregrounds the already-existing complexities of gender identity. The experiences of the women discussed here cohere around their class position, though other life experiences add to this dynamic, as illustrated in the chapters by Plank, Kaziboni, and De Mendonca and Khunou. This complexity was further problematised by the narratives discussed by Scheepers and Margo; their studies illustrate the challenges of identity politics in a context that includes a history of discrimination and continued harassment and othering.

## References

- Bhana D. 2013. Introducing love: Gender, sexuality and power. *Agenda*, 27:2(3–11). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2013.822688>
- Lorde A. 1984. *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.