White teenage girls and affirmative action in higher education in South Africa

H. Botsis
University of Cape Town
South Africa
e-mail: hannah.botsis@gmail.com

Abstract
This is an initial and exploratory comment on the pilot phase of a study into adolescent female white identity and socio-sexual desire in post-apartheid South Africa. In the course of this pilot it became apparent that historical issues of race and racism are openly discussed in these girls’ classrooms. Yet, despite these everyday interactions the sensitive current day politics of race, specifically related to Affirmative Action in Higher Education, are not spoken about in a personal way in public spaces such as the classroom. Findings from this phase in the study revealed an inability, and lack of opportunity, to openly discuss race politics that are pertinent to these learners’ presents and futures. In this brief commentary I argue that the nonracial ideology, espoused by the post-apartheid government cannot become naturalized if these learners are unable to work through some of the contradictions of their present. One of these contradictions is the continued salience of race in their lives and futures as they enter the university, while having intimate social relations, which seem to belie this reality. I argue for an exploration of participatory mechanisms – ways for the youth to find a vocabulary of their own in articulating the challenge of race. Part of the struggle in establishing this vocabulary is what Nuttall (2001) has identified as a duplicity in white identity, which is in part a complicity in maintaining the hegemony of whiteness.

How does one come to understand the production of a racial sensibility in South Africa? How is race instantiated into the ways in which young people think about themselves, their relationships with each other and their place in society? In this brief essay I work with a few transcripts of interviews conducted with Grade 12 female learners who are about to enter the university. The interviews focus on their responses to the admissions policies of the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town. They were conducted as part of a larger study into white identity and socio-sexual desire. The purpose of the study is to understand the nature of the inscription of race in texts, such as laws, into the consciousness and the bodies of young white women.

The participant in this initial interview is a matric learner at a formerly white government school in a once white working class suburb (in which she has always lived), in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. Both the neighborhood and the school are now thoroughly racially mixed in a demographic sense. I quote, at length, an extract from one of the participants in the study.
White teenage girls and affirmative action in higher education in South Africa

**Participant:** Well, I’m not gonna lie, all the kids here are more worried about a coloured person getting chosen into college over yourself because of the whole quota system and how they want to make Stellenbosch predominantly black and like, and the Afrikaans vibe is why everyone’s going there and I think that puts major pressure on all of us, because we have to get 90% to get into a college when they only have to get 60% and I think that its completely wrong because I don’t want a doctor who got 60% in high school, I want a doctor who like got 90% in high school. I think most of us now have lived through the apartheid era and we’ve all had the same education, we’ve all had to work for it, why should the standards of education be different? And for us in matric, I mean, when we’re speaking with our friends, speaking to our teachers, it’s been really difficult because that’s always been a worrying thing on my mind, because what if we don’t get chosen?

I mean half the kids here are “conditionally” accepted. So if someone of a different colour gets chosen above them, we only find out at the end of January, what are they going to do?

**Interviewer:** When you talk about this with your friends and your teachers and that, is that a multiracial group of friends? Does everyone feel that tension? Is it a tension?

**Participant:** Ja well I think, for the kids that are getting into education and wanna become teachers for them its not a big thing, because we need teachers so they get in anyway, but the kids who are wanting to do accounting, I have a multiracial group of friends, um, some of them, think because being black is a, well, they don’t think of it the way I do, or the way some of my friends do, they think we all have to work just as hard, and you know, some of them do work just as hard, I mean some of them get really, really good grades because they don’t wanna be put into that prejudice. But um, a lot of the kids don’t think like that, they think, we making it up, but I mean, its in the guidelines, its in the college guidelines. So you have to get that, so it is a tension, but I don’t think kids like talking about it because it’s a touchy subject, so our teachers, like I know Mr Van Vuuren,² he’ll tell you straight up, you need to do this, or you’re not going to get in. You need to get this and you need to do this, he was a lot more straight forward whereas a lot of the other teachers, avoid the subject because its touchy and you’re in a multiracial class and you don’t wanna upset anybody, but it is definitely a tension, especially for the matrics, because this is your future, like, so, I think that, unless you get 90% you don’t have a future.

The quoted passage comes from almost the very beginning of the interview in which I asked her to just generally tell me a little about herself. In reply to the question she used the phrase ‘society like it is now’, and this conversation ensued. The second interview I did with a girl from the same school, but living in a nearby middle class suburb also almost immediately flagged the issue of university entrance being a point of frustration in her life.
Their responses draw on many apartheid and post-apartheid identity discourses, and throw us immediately into the complex world of a teenager in a multiracial, multi-class classroom. In this school space learners simultaneously resist and conform to these discourses (the necessary and contradictory nature of this process Soudien (2001; 2007) has detailed elsewhere). What was initially most fascinating in unpacking their responses was the ability and opportunity to speak about current day racial politics. In this space of flux, conformity and contestation, there was an obvious inability and lack of opportunity to openly discuss race politics that was pertinent to these learners’ presents and futures.

Both girls in this piloting stage expressed great enthusiasm at being asked to talk freely about racial issues, how they feel about them, and how they situate themselves within their social worlds, in a judgment-free/safe space (which may have more to do with me being a young white woman myself than anything else, nevertheless the opportunity to speak was appreciated). These are racial issues they say are on their minds but they do not speak about them openly or in any deep and meaningful sense. This personal silence seems to be mirrored in current racial/affirmative action debates within the classroom.

Interracial interaction, fraught as it may be in certain situations, has nevertheless become a normalized experience in the school. Interracial groups of friends and couples are common place at the school. Historical issues of race and racism are discussed openly, perhaps because it is a narrative that is not their own, a history they feel removed from but live the effects of. Yet despite these everyday interactions, the sensitive current day politics of race are not spoken about in a personal way in public spaces such as the classroom. Rather, it is avoided because it is a ‘touchy’ topic and teachers and learners alike do not want to ‘upset’ anybody. This is illustrative of Soudien’s point that while ‘the official ideology of the post-apartheid government is to promote non-racialism and a new inclusive South Africanism. The identity construction tensions in the new system, however, have not disappeared’ (2001, 312). I would also argue that the nonracial ideology cannot become naturalized if these learners are unable to work through some of the contradictions of their present, one of which is the continued salience of race in their lives and futures, while having intimate social relations which seem to belie this reality.

The assumptions of the ‘contact hypothesis’, that the simple existence of people of different races coming into contact with one another will reduce stereotypes and improve race relations must be challenged (Vincent 2008, 1430), especially in situations where stereotyping may have been broken down and challenged, only to be built up again because of a current day race politics. I argue here for an exploration of participatory mechanisms – ways for the youth to find a voice, a vocabulary of their own in articulating the challenge of race – which will move us beyond the simple contact and numbers arguments that have come to characterize transformation efforts (Reddy 2008, 217). The challenge in transformation has to do with breaking down the ‘artificiality of social relations’ between different race groups Jansen 2009, 139), not just ‘representivity’ (Reddy 2008, 217).
White teenage girls and affirmative action in higher education in South Africa

These racial politics drawing on commonsense notions of race should not be understood merely as a residual effect of apartheid, but rather that new life is being given to these terms, as they are being used for issues of redress in attempting to transform (Vincent 2008, 1427). The key issue in this commentary is that there is a lack of will, vocabulary and knowledge as to how to negotiate this sensitive terrain in the new discursive space of the country, which may lead to new forms of racial tension. I argue that this is one of the reasons why, as Distiller commented, ‘transformation is proving to be so difficult’ (in Soudien 2009, 2). The difficulty turns out to be the lack of discourse in the common sense, and a discourse of silence when it comes to the youth, race and affirmative action. What I am commenting on here is not a complete silence on the issue, but a lack of a real intimate discussion with one’s peers, a moment in which one becomes vulnerable about one’s fears about the future, these are discussions which are not taking place interracial, only intra-racially, it seems. And when these issues cannot be discussed in this close manner in the so-called non-racial classroom, assumptions about the ‘other’ are left to sediment, borrow from old prejudices and take on new forms.

The assumed inferiority-complex of her black classmates, referred to by the respondent, who she says work hard, by implication suggests that they cannot work as hard as she does, because she is being held to a higher standard, is problematic. This is problematic in a classroom, and for a future university lecture hall and fellowship, where any personal interaction still has assumptions of superiority and inferiority, privilege and denial shadowing social interaction. A proper discussion of these issues is however beyond the scope of this commentary.

Transformation, including Affirmative Action in Higher Education in educational institutions needs to take into account the fact that ‘the apartheid story is rendered in an infinite variety of ways to the next generation who, in turn, incorporate that story into their own realities in many different guises’ (Vincent 2008, 1443), thus a policy of redress needs to carefully negotiate the way in which it draws on old categories.

It seems that drawing on these historical categories is unavoidable, imperfect a solution as it may be, this is the awkward legacy we must work with. But if these categories are used this needs to be done in a reflexive way, especially as far as the post-apartheid generation is concerned. If all they have access to is the racial vocabulary of apartheid supplied by their parents’ assumptions, using these imperfect yet necessary categories will do unintentional harm. Also, if we opened up spaces and ways for the youth to speak about what they think the solutions to some of these problems are, then hopefully, we would not be superimposing historical baggage, which they feel both a part of and removed from, on them. As Erasmus has noted, ‘people play a part in constituting themselves as racialised ... Apartheid has shown that the possibilities open for the kinds of persons we can be are shaped and limited by a particular historical juncture. At the same time, we are not trapped by history. As agents capable of reflecting on the limits of the past, we can open up new possibilities for being a person, possibilities outside race, and create new tools with which to make ourselves and our realities’ (2008, 178). However, in currently
using race as a proxy for disadvantage an awareness needs to be not only displayed on the part of the university, but fostered in its potential entrants, that there is a tension ‘between re-inscribing the idea [of race], and acknowledging the inequalities it stands for in one’s efforts to eradicate both these inequalities and the idea itself’ (Erasmus 2008, 179).

This entrance policy also needs to acknowledge that there are multiracial classrooms in South Africa, where there is to some extent an equality of educational opportunity (not to negate the complexities of social, cultural, and economic capital beyond the classroom and how these intersect with race). In one such multiracial classroom, very similar to the one this participant finds herself in, Dolby (2001) found that among working class white high school girls who were in the minority at their school, what she termed ‘the politics of resentment’ (2001, 8) at being displaced in a social situation in which whiteness was once dominant. This is evidenced in this excerpt but not in a straightforward resentment of others of different races. Rather it is closer to Jansen’s notion of loss of knowledge and security (2009) expressed an insecurity and anxiety about the future. There is a sense of frustration with a system that might undercut both herself, and her black classmates, but in different ways. There is resentment at coming from a similar class background to her black and coloured classmates, having experienced similar financial struggles, living in the same neighbourhood, having forged genuine interracial friendships, and yet still being apprehensive about her future. Once the inequalities of race once stood for have been erased, we are back to giving the contentless notion of race salience without cause. I acknowledge however, the ever-present problem of the particular and the universal, and that policy is to address the trend not the exception. For the sake of South Africa’s nonracial ideology however, the youth must feel that they are a genuine part of the conversation on transformation.

The institutional is ultimately about the everyday and we cannot make policy as if they are separate, and do not lead to future tension at the university itself. We need to learn to find ways of speaking about the deeply personal, even though it seems far removed from the policy realm. While there may be more racial mixing, the normativity of whiteness is still firmly in place3 (Sherman and Steyn 2009, 71) – this will not undo itself unless spaces are opened up for the youth to openly, and without fear, speak about the tensions and awkwardnesses of living in a schizophrenic society. Nuttall, writing on whiteness in South African writing, speaks of a ‘duplicity which is in part a complicity – now with [her] old friends, now with “politically committed” South Africans’. Here white identity, and I think this is also true of young white learners today, possibly even all South African learners, is marked by a doubleness, a multiplication of the self, ‘sustaining two different characters in one life’ (Nuttall 2001, 125).

This multiplication of the self is generated from learners’ exposure to, and participation in official discourses of non-racialism in schools, formal discourses of affirmative action in higher education variously applied, and informal discourses4 from their parents and friends, which again variously conform to and reject racialised
White teenage girls and affirmative action in higher education in South Africa

notions of identity. The extent to which some of these discourses are foregrounded or not also depends on audience identity and social situation. A possible way to limit this multiplication of the self is to create spaces in which we can be vulnerable about our prejudices and fears. The opportunity for such an interracial youth discussion about Affirmative Action policies in Higher Education seems to be lacking and requires further probing.

NOTES

1 I reject the existence of race as an empirical reality, but for the purposes of this comment and for my study, I have used racial terms as used in everyday language by South Africans, based on apartheid racial categories. Even though I reject the existence of race in theory, in reality race has come to shape South African social realities and identities in profound ways.

2 Name has been changed.

3 This was evidenced elsewhere in the interview, through comments about what is proper and expected of different groups of people and the extent to which that is tied to racial ideals of whiteness. Again, there is not room here for adequate discussion of this issue.

4 I have borrowed the categories official, formal and informal from Soudien’s analysis of youth identities in South Africa (2001, 312).

REFERENCES


