

Working In The “New South Africa”:
An Ethnographic Approach To Affirmative Action

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Abstract

Working In The “New South Africa”: An Ethnographic Approach To Affirmative Action

Maja Romano

Barely a generation since the abolition of apartheid, South Africa is still struggling with the transition toward racial integration. In 1998, the Employment Equity Act was introduced to assist with this process. However, while affirmative action policies are attempting to redress the nation’s long history of racial discrimination, reactions to their implementation have been mixed. Although many South Africans claim to be in favour of affirmative action, the policies are nonetheless generating a considerable amount of criticism. As such, efforts to integrate the country’s previously disadvantaged individuals into the labour force have been met with both practical and ideological barriers from various sectors of society.

Following six months of fieldwork in Johannesburg, this thesis is an ethnographic examination of how policies for affirmative action in South Africa are affecting people’s negotiations of “race” in the workplace and beyond. Specifically, it seeks to question the incongruency between what is intended “on paper” and how it is interpreted “on the ground”. It considers the impact of equity codes on people from “designated groups”, who are the intended recipients, as well as those that are not directly included in the policies but are nonetheless affected by them.

Through the narratives of the various participants, this study attempts to move away from the statistical analyses that have dominated the media and adopt instead an ethnographic approach supported by historical, political, economic and social contextualization. In turn, the responses to affirmative action policies reflect the complexity behind the construction of race in South Africa today.

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To the Secret Society, you have shared the struggle and have understood the journey, and I wish you all success, happiness and, above all, freedom from liminality.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people of South Africa, for it is their struggle that has driven my own, and their voices that have kept me focused. André Brink wrote, "The worst crime is to do nothing, for fear that we cannot do enough". For your courage in choosing to walk the long road every day, I remain truly humbled and always inspired.

Maja Romano

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Why South Africa? Why Affirmative Action?

When I first went to South Africa on holiday in 2002, I really did not know too much about the situation I was getting into. From everything I knew and had read about the victory of black South Africans in achieving equality, and from my first impressions of the luxurious neighbourhood I stayed in, the modern shopping centres and elegant buildings, I was full of ideals about what an amazing place this was, having survived such a repressive past and coming out so much stronger.

I cannot say that these ideals were shattered, but the South Africa that I have come to experience is clearly still struggling with its long history of racial discrimination. When I returned to South Africa a year and a half later, I was still visiting recreationally but this time I was also doing some research for a class I was taking at Concordia. I was interested in hearing people's perceptions on changes they had experienced since 1994 and the official abolition of apartheid. Out of this broad theme, one of the things that struck me the most were the repeated references to affirmative action policies in the workplace and the great deal of criticism they were receiving from a lot of the people I spoke with. It was in the course of these interviews that I spoke with Jan¹, a man who had been forced to take a severance package from the company he had worked at for seventeen years. He stated that because of new affirmative action policies, his company was pressured to hire black employees to replace the predominantly white workers at the firm. Since then, Jan has been unable to find a job because he is, in his words, a "white, middle-aged man – which is as good as saying you're 'unhirable'."

¹ All names have been changed in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants of this study.

Furthermore, one newspaper article quoted a white South African businessman as saying that “asking the business community to support transformation is rather like asking a turkey to endorse Christmas” (as quoted by Deegan 2001:125).

I found this troubling because these policies are supposed to be easing racial tensions, and from everything I was hearing they seemed to be having the opposite effect. These sites of incongruence between what is being legislated and what is actually taking place in South Africa have formed the basis for my thesis, which considers the social, political and economic effects of labour laws and their implications for race in South Africa, with a particular focus on the response from the white middle class. Within the thesis I question how the Employment Equity Act of 1998 has affected both workers from “designated groups” whom the policies are intended to aid and protect, as well as those who fall outside these boundaries but invariably have come to feel their effects.

Within it I set out three central guidelines for exploration, which I approach through my own ethnographic material as well as relevant theoretical considerations. The first goal is to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach that is grounded in anthropology but also looks at contributions made by economic, historical, political and sociological studies to lend context and meaning to the ethnography; I found this approach important for all of the unique elements that each discipline can contribute to our understanding of an incredibly complex situation. The second goal is the exploration of the contested spaces created by people’s navigations of affirmative action policies in order to examine inconsistency between that which is “on paper” and that which is experienced “on the ground”. The third is recognition of the

complexity of daily life in Johannesburg and the need not only to observe it but to continually ask questions of it instead of merely documenting it; that is to move beyond the statistics.

Fieldwork Setting

As described in Chapter 2, I spent a period of six months from May to November of 2004 living in Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa while conducting fieldwork. My methodology included interviews with people who are currently employed, and included various sized companies covering several different sectors. It also included observations of every settings and interactions outside the workspace.

The Employment Equity Act spells out that the people who benefit from affirmative action, or “designated groups”, includes black people, women and people with disabilities; “black people” is further described as a generic term meaning Africans, Coloureds and Indians (South African Department of Labour 1998). For the purpose of this thesis, I was interested in the relationship between South Africa’s black majority and its white minority because it is the tensions between these two groups that were most often discussed among acquaintances as well as people I had previously interviewed. I did not, however, limit my interviews to just these two groups, instead meeting with anyone willing to speak with me and contribute their insights in order to include as many different voices as possible. I conducted approximately 30 formal interviews, most often going to people’s places of work and speaking with them in their offices, boardrooms and lobbies, as well as occasionally

going to people's homes. The majority of the people I interviewed were white although this was not a choice on my part, but a reflection of the high numbers of white South Africans still dominating the workforce, particularly the upper level, office jobs where I was conducting interviews and where statistics show white people are still present in the highest numbers (Pressly 2007). My choice of the corporate setting was influenced by the general environment I was conducting research in; because of the high levels of crime in Johannesburg, I had to choose locations that would be relatively safe for both me and my participants.

Theoretical Overview

Throughout my interviews, one of the first things to stand out was that many of the people I spoke with were really concerned that black workers were getting hired even though they were not properly qualified for the positions they were applying for. However, I noted that the policy stipulates that it only applies to qualified candidates rather than the entire population. So it is not surprising that some of the criticism around affirmative policies comes from the fact that it *is* a quota system; as much as it makes claims not to be, the goals of this policy are to make numbers add up on paper without thoroughly considering the impact on the labour force or what this means for constructions of race.

This leads to a further set of problems, raised in Part I of Chapter 5, particularly among white males who are concerned about being pushed out of their favoured positions in the workforce. I specify "white males" because this is the population that has historically benefited most from discriminatory practices, both in

terms of race and gender. Among the people I spoke with, there is a general concern about the idea of a “brain drain” taking skilled white workers out of South Africa, either because they are pushed out of their jobs to make way for black employees or because they feel they do not have enough opportunities or even because they simply cannot accept working on equal terms with black workers. In my comparative section on South Africa and the United States in Chapter 6, I consider the difference between the two countries. While black people form a minority in America, accounting for less than a tenth of the population, in South Africa black people make up over three-quarters of the total population. There is therefore a sense of fear that the incorporation of black workers in South Africa will create a great deal of competition and quite possibly displacement for white workers.

There are several important points that arise from this. The first is that implementing affirmative action policies with numerical goals and quotas as the bottom line is going to create a lot of problems once people see how this translates on the ground and decide that although some people are benefiting, others may be hurt by this process and opt to get out rather than accommodate themselves. Another is that people’s unwillingness to accept these policies may be further embedding the idea that racial integration cannot work. Because some see the response to leave as being racially motivated, it sends out a message of rejection – rejection of change and rejection of integration. The other important issue arising from this revolves around the concept of “reverse racism” as raised in Chapter 4. Adam (1997) uses this concept to describe how people who previously benefited under discriminatory laws are now feeling threatened by new policies that are trying

to put everyone on equal footing. In South Africa, this situation has some people asking whether the white male will become the new disadvantaged group in several years.

All of these problems that surfaced throughout my interviews and observations indicate that affirmative action policies are needed and can be beneficial in redressing the past, as even the most staunch critics often confirmed during our interviews. However, what is happening “on paper” is not necessarily being translated as effectively “on the ground”.

A special case that is considered where this is evident is among small businesses, as presented in Part II of Chapter 5. Companies with fewer than fifty employees face a specific set of circumstances in implementing affirmative action because of their limited resources. Although small businesses are not technically included under affirmative action policies, the laws are in the process of changing right now to incorporate them, and also several small business owners I spoke with said that they would have a hard time doing business unless they could show they were “black empowered”. However, among both small and large companies, inability or refusal to follow affirmative action requirement may lead to the creation of a “front company”. “Fronting” occurs when, white company owner buys out a company that mostly employees black workers and maintain just a loose affiliation with it in order to meet policy goals. Again, we see how the focus on quotas in these policies can affect the economy and also reinforce the message that racial integration in the workforce is not practical or desirable.

With all of this tension being felt in the workplace, it is therefore not surprising that it *does* carry over when people leave their jobs at the end of the day and go home. Within Part III of Chapter 5, I consider how rejection of integration and assumptions about race that are present in the workforce also extend into other domains of people's personal lives. The racial tension that pervades life in Johannesburg is expressed regularly in all kinds of everyday situations. One example is the problem of high crime levels, a theme that was frequently racialized by many of the people I spoke with. Currently South Africa holds one of the highest crime rates in the world (Schonteich 2000:1).

The Comaroffs (2006) see these elevated levels of crime as being unique to what they call the "post colony" – that is, countries that are undergoing socio-political shifts toward democracy. In South Africa, the transition from a repressive and discriminatory regime, to one that has democracy and egalitarianism as its central goals, has been a relatively fast change. In addition to the high unemployment rates, currently between 26 and 38 per cent (Kingdon and Knight 2005:1), and shifting political structures, the Comaroffs explain that a large informal economy will often develop parallel to the changing formal economy in this type of transition. They also argue that interference through outside organizations like the World Bank and IMF contributes to the problem by forcing capitalist market principles onto local modes of production. In South Africa, all of these imbalances have formed what they call a "simulacra of social order" where often corrupt and violent means are used to run an informal economy alongside the developing formal system.

However, racial tensions are often expressed through more subtle forms. For example, as I saw in Chapter 5, just going to get a driver's licence renewed can become a mission because of the long line-ups and confusion about proper forms. But what really stood out in these situations is that very often I would hear white South Africans blame affirmative action and black economic empowerment (or BEE) for everything from the long line-ups for various services to notoriously bad traffic to the regular power outages. I was therefore interested in how these frustrations with everyday problems come to be racialized and directed onto equity policies, and what it means for negotiations of race in the workforce and beyond.

I look at this issue in Chapter 4 through the theoretical framework of the anthropology of policy. A key point that stands out in this approach is that policies often become objectified, as do its subjects (Shore and Wright 1997). Essentially what we see in South Africa is that the policies become a metaphor through which people sometimes express racist beliefs. This can be linked to what Jacobson (1985) describes as the *new racism*, which arises when *symbols* become the targets of racism rather than people themselves, in this case the symbol being the labour policy. Obviously, overt racial discrimination has been illegal since the end of apartheid, but there is nothing to say that people cannot criticize policies, which is what I have overheard so often from some disgruntled and usually white South Africans.

Therefore, through the anthropology of policy, I argue that a policy is not a neutral object but rather a political process that is capable of affecting social norms. Policies rely on people to interpret them, and the choices they make to either adopt

or reject them, either fully or partially, reveals the need for them to be considered as cultural categories, existing in a particular context and shaping people's day-to-day lives.

Other theoretical perspectives that will be explored in this thesis include Gupta and Ferguson's (1997) approach to place, power and identity. They explain that the concept of space is not fixed but rather it is constantly being negotiated and reinterpreted. For example, for several years South Africa's government has been running a mass advertising campaign promoting what they call the "New South Africa". It is a concept that certainly incorporates policies on affirmative action, and generally promotes equality and modernity as national goals. However, I argue that this *space* that is created, this New South Africa, is nonetheless highly contested.

Furthermore, Gupta and Ferguson propose that identity is an unstable relation involving the discovery of difference. The creation of racial identity in South Africa is a complex process, one that is indeed shaped by affirmative action policies, which, in their endeavour to equal the playing field, first differentiate people according to racial categories to determine who should benefit from them. However, as many people's narratives have shown, it is these categories that are creating a great deal of tension by not only reinforcing boundaries between racial groups but also by defining who gets to benefit from affirmative action and who does not.

Stemming from this, one of the biggest challenges in writing this thesis has been dealing with race and identity in terms relevant and appropriate to South African discourse. Anthropologists have long since acknowledged race as a social rather than scientific construct. Though it may not be scientifically real, however, it is

nonetheless real in its social consequences. I have attempted to address this issue in several ways, first by incorporating terminology and narratives that the participants in this study used themselves (see following note for details), as well as applying Eison Simmons' concept of *racial enculturation* (2006), which she describes as a process by which we come to come to *know* race. Eison Simmons says that anthropologists need to interrogate race as a *lived* experience if we are to understand how people construct their place and identity. However, there is little room for this in affirmative action policies, which seek to first and foremost to apply labels without accounting for the depth and complexity of human variation. Without this deeper understanding, it is not surprising that these policies are generating limited enthusiasm by those who feel that race is anything but a black and white issue.

However, as this thesis will explore, this is *not* the end of the story in South Africa. There *are* positive attempts being made to address these issues, as I have come to hear. These approaches, as will be shown, may be revealing of positive changes toward racial equity in business practice.

A Note on Terminology

The act of writing about South African issues presents a particular challenge to researchers in light of the country's troublesome history of racial discrimination. In the introduction to one study, the author states, "all writers on South Africa are confronted by the problem of finding a suitable terminology to describe the different racial groups" (Feinstein 2005:xix). The process of selecting appropriate terms for this thesis has been no exception. The terminology ultimately used throughout has been carefully applied in order to maintain consistency and to most closely represent the narratives of the participants.

Before proceeding further, however, some initial notes on usage need to be pointed out to illustrate the meanings of particular terms used throughout this thesis. "Race" as a category of classification and analysis has been a contentious issue in the social sciences, and indeed has widely come to be accepted as a social construct. However, "the folk idea of race as skin color remains powerful in our society and racism has become part of legislation and institutions in ways that make it very difficult to extirpate" (Shanklin 1999:671). In nations where racial discrimination has subordinated certain groups for the benefit of others, "race" is often at the heart of policies aimed at creating equal opportunities.

In such contexts, however, "race" has often come to be essentialized, polarizing people through a statistical summarization that does not necessarily match their lived realities. The complexity of "race" as a social process is obscured by the need to categorize populations for the purposes of affirmative action policies, and there are two main reasons for this. First, it is believed that it is "necessary to

tag people with race designations in order to verify affirmative action” (Brues 1993:77) so that, second, policy makers and analysts who value statistical and formulaic analyses can produce reports that are “digestible”. As Brues sums up simply, “if everything about race is in one tight bundle, you can attach a convenient handle to it, perhaps a color word, and have no further strain on your brain” (1993:74).

To illustrate this point, a review of the South African Employment Equity Act reveals, as mentioned, that “designated groups” include black people (meaning Africans, Coloureds and Indians), women, and people with disabilities (South African Department of Labour 1998). Similarly, in the United States, “minorities” are categorized as “American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic individuals” (U.S. Department of Labor 1996). Within these pieces of legislation, it is easy to see how diverse populations can be lumped into vague or inappropriate categories.

An anthropological analysis, on the other hand, cannot be squeezed quite so easily onto a list, a pie chart or a spreadsheet. It seeks to find the meaning behind the numbers, to contextualize people’s everyday experiences in order to show the intricacies and subtleties behind the trends. Put another way, “if we are going to have any hope of demystifying concepts as complex as race, ethnicity, and identity, then we need both to diversify and to resolutely populate the scenarios we examine” (Amit 1996:14). This mean adopting an ethnographic approach that takes serious account of the *people* behind the policies, how they are affected by them, how they

ascribe meaning to them, and in turn how their own systems of belief are shaped by such policies.

Following from this, the use of the term “race” throughout this paper is applied as a representation of an ongoing social process as interpreted by the people manoeuvring through it. Miles and Torres (1996) similarly look at race as an *idea* rather than as a *concept* in order to convey this everyday negotiation, and therefore highlight the importance of differentiating between the categorical and the experiential application of the term. Furthermore, the use of apparent racial markers (e.g. “black”, “white”) are merely reflections of the discourse in both the formal ethnographic interviews and daily encounters in Johannesburg. They are not my own labels but rather are used to reflect the common vocabulary of the participants, thereby attempting as much as possible to stay true to their narratives and ideas.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Locating the field

South Africa is located at the southern-most tip of the African continent where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans merge. It is a nation of almost 48-million inhabitants living within nine provinces. According to the most recent statistics, the population composition is 79.6 percent “African”; 8.9 percent “Coloured”; 2.5 percent “Indian/Asian”; and 9.1 percent “White” (Statistics South Africa 2007:3)². The fieldwork for this thesis was conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa’s largest city, which has a population of 3.2 million (Joburg.org.za 2007). The city is located in the geographically smallest but economically strongest province of Gauteng (Government Communication and Information System 2007).

In order to undertake the type of research necessary for this study, some very important factors had to be taken into consideration. These were determined not just by the nature of the research, but also by the particular setting in which it was conducted. Those who have traveled to South Africa have undoubtedly been warned about the high levels of crime they are likely to encounter, particularly in the city of Johannesburg. A popular local tourism website has the following to say about Jo’burg (as it is locally called):

Please keep in mind that certain parts of South Africa might be dangerous but then so is [sic] certain parts of Washington, New York, London, Sydney, Rio etc. Common sense will prevail mostly everywhere in South Africa except in Jo'burg... We get about 30 e-mails /month asking if Jo'burg are [sic] really this bad. It's not; it's about 10 times worse. [Adventure Travel Africa 2005]

A quick glance beyond the ten-foot tall concrete walls of the complex I stayed in confirmed that this attitude was prevalent “on the streets” since on an average

² These categories, their use and meaning will be discussed in detail in further sections of this thesis.

day, I was likely to observe very few white pedestrians freely walking about. During my first week in the field, I apparently left several (white) acquaintances troubled by a short walk I took to the local supermarket. As was repeatedly pointed out to me, walking about Jo'burg was "asking for trouble".

Looking into urban danger in the United States, Sally Engle Merry posed the question, "how do urbanites in general conceptualize and manage danger?" (1981:4). For many black South Africans, staying off the streets is often not an option, for example due to limited personal transportation or the need to make a living by panhandling or selling produce to passing drivers and workers. Statistics indicate that black people are far more likely than their white counterparts to work in the informal labour sector since "the unemployment rate for black [South] Africans is 31.3 percent...and whites 5.4 percent" (Lehohla 2005:1). Therefore, while crime and danger are certainly a reality, economic needs often take precedence.

Inversely, it was often conveyed to me that white people who strayed from the safety of their high-gated homes and security-monitored commercial centres were seen to be leaving themselves exposed to both the perceived and actual risk of criminal activity, and so a great deal of the time, travel is conducted in the relative safety of the car. What was usually neglected in such descriptions was that black people are also at great risk of crime in the streets but that the need to make a living dominates over safety. This corresponds with Merry's study in that "all of these people face the same hazards, yet their attitudes, fears, and modes of coping vary enormously" (1981:4).

In my case, as an anthropologist with an unreliable sense of direction and an even less reliable old Volkswagen Golf for transport (which in any case quickly ended up breaking down beyond repair), manoeuvring about the city proved to be a daunting task. In a recent communiqué with another anthropologist currently attempting to conduct research in Johannesburg, a similar sense of frustration was expressed at the inability to move about freely, particularly on foot. As this researcher put it “I am...under the impression that I’m accomplishing very little other than getting quite chubby from lack of exercise!” (E-mail to author, June 19, 2005). Therefore, the archaic image of the anthropologist wandering around the community, pausing to observe and chat with locals, is in fact quite removed from the reality of being a field researcher in a city like Johannesburg.

In dealing with this, I had to resolve my discomfort at feeling as though, on the one hand, I was propagating the “myths” of criminal activity in the city by not moving about as freely as I would back home, and, on the other hand, maintaining an adequate level of safety and awareness. In truth, in a city where the public transport system is extremely limited and even public spaces such as parks are few and monitored by gun-toting security teams, “getting around” came to be a considerable problem. Kovats-Bernat points out a gap in anthropological literature dealing with the problems of working in potentially dangerous environments, and states that this is an important point of consideration for researchers:

As we continue to conduct research in increasingly hostile and dangerous regions, the very real possibility of our victimization in the field presents a challenge not just to the practicalities of personal safety but also to the ethnographic methods and ethics that we are retrofitting for use in cultures in which ordinary interrelations and social institutions are overshadowed by unrest, instability, and fear. [2002:208]

Bearing all this in mind, the idea of conducting fieldwork in a corporate environment was both a matter of fitting the setting to the study and vice versa – in the one sense, conducting research in the office environment was necessary for the type of study being done, but at the same time was made inevitable by the larger context in which I was working.

Gatekeepers: Making Contact and Getting In

From previous visits to South Africa, I was fortunate to have already met and developed social relationships with quite a few people, most of whom knew the general theme of my research when I returned to do my fieldwork. Therefore, I assumed that “getting in” to different places of business would not be too difficult. The matter proved to be more complicated than anticipated. For one thing, I felt initial hesitation at interviewing acquaintances about highly politicized topics such as race and employment equity since, by placing us in the positions of interviewer and informant, a new dimension was added to our relationship that was not entirely comfortable for either of us. However, approaching strangers with my research and requesting their time and ideas was also unsettling for a new researcher still assessing the situation. It became all too apparent that “identifying the relevant gatekeepers is not always straightforward” (Hammersly & Atkinson 1996:64).

As it turned out, access was initially gained through Maxine, an acquaintance who in good spirit volunteered her boss, Cindy, for my study while we were chatting about it over drinks. Although a seemingly unlikely opportunity for “networking”, it nonetheless proved that “gaining access...involves drawing on the interpersonal

resources and strategies that we all tend to develop in dealing with everyday life” (Hammersly & Atkinson 1996:54). Feeling that this was my opportunity to launch into the research, I asked Maxine to suggest the idea to her boss, and once that was done to let me know if she was receptive. She did so the following week wherein I called Cindy, and thus scheduled my first interview.

I had the luck to have my first official interview with a person who was very enthusiastic about the topic of affirmative action, and was in fact employed as a Skills Development Facilitator for a company dealing with investment in infrastructure development in Gauteng province. In addition, she did voluntary development work for an organization that provides alternatives to violence in the townships. Therefore, speaking with her was quite easy as she had direct knowledge of many of the policies with which this research is concerned. The interview lasted close to two hours, and indeed helped to shape the rest of my interviews by providing me with substance and interesting areas for discussion.

From this point, securing future meetings became much easier. Once several formal interviews were conducted, I felt more comfortable speaking with people as I became more familiar with the issues that most closely affected them, and as such was able to better direct the discussions. Furthermore, once participants came to understand the process behind my research, they often put me in touch with other people whom they thought would provide interesting data for my interviews. Thus the *snowball* effect (Berg 2004) came to play a significant role in helping me secure participants for my study.

Fieldwork Methods

During the course of my research, I conducted approximately 30 formal interviews, all of which lasted a minimum of one hour (with one record-breaking interview taking up the better length of an afternoon). I also spent many hours engaging in participant-observation around people's places of work, mostly by bringing notes with me and watching the day-to-day interactions of workers. Beyond this, a good deal of my information surfaced sporadically through people's comments during everyday activities such as grocery shopping or driving to work, thereby helping me accumulate a solid amount of informal data outside the controls of the official interview. On one occasion I was also able to conduct a focus group with the three owners of a small business.

In terms of the people I spoke with, I conducted interviews with anyone willing to speak with me about my research. The largest number of participants, over half the total, were white workers, although this was not a personal choice but a reflection of access. Consider the following: according to the July 1994 General Household Survey, the number of black South Africans of working age who were employed in the top labour category ("legislation, senior officials and managers") was 2.6 percent; in contrast, the number of white South Africans of working age employed in the same category was 22.5 percent (calculations based on Statistics South Africa 1995:36). This means that even though South Africa's total population is classified as 79.6 percent black and 9.1 percent white, white South Africans are still *nine times* more likely to hold positions in the most highly paid jobs. Since fieldwork for this study was conducted in corporate environments (generally

considered to be on the higher end of the wage spectrum), the statistics reveal the greater presence of white people in these areas and this in turn explains why access to white South African employees occurred more frequently than access to their black counterparts³, who made up approximately one-third of the total number of participants. The remaining participants were of Indian background.

Regarding age, approximately twenty interviewees were under forty years old, putting the focus on younger generations, although the narratives of the older participants, as well as two retired workers, were also included. All but three of the interviewees were born in South Africa; those three, however, have been in the South African workforce for at least ten years. Males and females were interviewed in relatively equal numbers. All participants would be considered within the middle-class range based on income.

The scale of company sizes included those with under twenty employees to those employing up to 30 000 workers, with equal distribution between large and small businesses. Of the people I spoke with, all had been with their current employer for at least one year. Approximately one-third of the participants were employed in the Information Technology (IT) field, possibly because this is a fast-developing sector to which many young people are now being drawn. The rest covered a variety of industries, including but not limited to insurance, pharmaceuticals, marketing, risk assessment and banking.

³ If we break down these percentages into numerical values, this point can be illustrated another way: even though black South Africans outnumber white South Africans by approximately eight to one, there are still 2.5 times as many white South Africans (467 000 total) in the top labour category ("Legislators, senior officials and managers") as there are black South Africans (190 000 total). (Statistics South Africa 2004:36)

Getting Acquainted

In general, people seemed quite willing to discuss the topic of affirmative action and its effects with me. Most of the time they were eager to show their “progressiveness” in terms of being open to a racially integrated South Africa, and in this context there are three likely reasons for this. On an individual level, there are people like Cindy, who, as mentioned, is committed to development work among South Africans living in poverty (the majority of which are black) and to finding, as she put it, “a different way to do things”. Cindy believes in the pursuit of racial equality and feels that South Africans, particularly “white South Africans”, are morally obligated “to do something to alleviate poverty, close the gap between the rich and the poor, and draw [workers] from the entire population”. Like Cindy, some of the people I spoke with expressed a strong belief in equality, thereby engaging in a personal struggle against the stereotypical image created during apartheid of the white South African as a “racist”. So as not to assume that this attitude is prevalent only among white South Africans, it must be pointed out that this spirit of progressiveness was evident among some black workers as well – according to Sfiso, a young and highly motivated black South African whom I came to have an ongoing friendship with, “people need to accept the revolution [toward equality] or get out”.

A forward-thinking attitude to race does not happen just in isolation among a few individuals, however. Considering the business sector as a micro field of analysis, there is an added dimension to adopting an egalitarian work ethic. For example, establishing and maintaining an image of a racially proportional workforce

ensures benefits such as greater foreign investment. As Sfiso said, “it gets the international intellectual capital flowing in”. This is clearly beneficial to the growth of companies and the economy as a whole.

On a macro level, some people’s open attitude toward race and integration can be linked to a national campaign encouraging all South Africans to practice tolerance and consideration for people of all colours, and falls under the banner of “the New South Africa”. This slogan can be seen advertised everywhere from highway billboards to tourism brochures. It is a relatively recent attempt to improve the nation’s image following years of international disapproval and sanctions against South Africa on account of the injustices carried out during the apartheid era. As President Mbeki declared in an address celebrating the Week of Reconciliation:

This is a dream about building a new South Africa at peace with itself, a new South Africa of reconciliation among ‘the warring tribes of (our) community’, a new South Africa that in its particular details genuinely belongs to all who live in it, black and white. [2004:4]

There are still those, however, to whom reconciliation does not come so easily. The reasons for this are manifold and will be discussed at length in further sections, and in fact underlie the overall theme of this study. In terms of conducting interviews, however, on several occasions I met with people who still carry the burdens of past injustice and racial discrimination. For example, Kenny, a black South African, informed me that he was “not so forgiving” as some of his colleagues, and throughout the course of our interview repeated the phrase, “people are racist”, indicating that he felt racial integration was not a natural means of co-existence. In such cases, perspectives on race were determined on a personal and social level

and the outside objectives of businesses and national agendas obviously had little impact.

Among all the people I spoke with throughout the duration of my fieldwork, their honesty and willingness to share their beliefs, regardless of what they were, are greatly appreciated and add to the depth of this research. There were instances, however, when people refused to speak with me altogether and my requests for an interview were unequivocally turned down. Serber accurately notes “the use of interview and participant observation methods, techniques that allow us to penetrate the masks of social reality, depend on the cooperation of those being studied” (Serber 1981:72).

As a case in point, I was acquainted with Marcus, a young man living in Johannesburg, and had spoken with him on several occasions about the research I was doing. After a time, Marcus suggested that it would be useful for me to interview his father, Willem, because, as Marcus explained, Willem came from a “traditional” Afrikaner family, meaning they were descendants of the Dutch colonizers and had spent many generations in South Africa. Furthermore, Marcus made it clear that his father, a powerful and wealthy businessman, held extremely strong opinions about “the place of race” in the workforce and that his father did not necessarily believe in a racially integrated and equal South Africa. In fact, he joked quite openly about what a “racist” he perceives his father to be.

In general (although there were some exceptions as noted), many of my informants were careful not to exhibit “old fashioned racism” (Jacobson 1985), meaning they avoided overtly negative attitudes and behaviour toward certain racial

groups. Therefore, it was useful to speak with people who would be willing to be open about such issues. However, this was not to be the case in this particular situation as Willem declined to meet with me, and I was not given any specific reason for his refusal.

One possible explanation would be that a man in his position would not wish to be portrayed as being “racist” in the fear that it would tarnish his public and professional image. David Serber, who has carried out extensive fieldwork in bureaucracies, points out that “in a research environment where there is a fundamental conflict between the public goals and actual behavior of the participants the question of cooperation may become even more problematic” (1981:72). I regret not being able to have the cooperation and viewpoints of such people as Marcus’ father in my study, although I recognize that his silence may hint at the complexities of the issues at play.

Chapter 3: Historical Overview and Contextualization

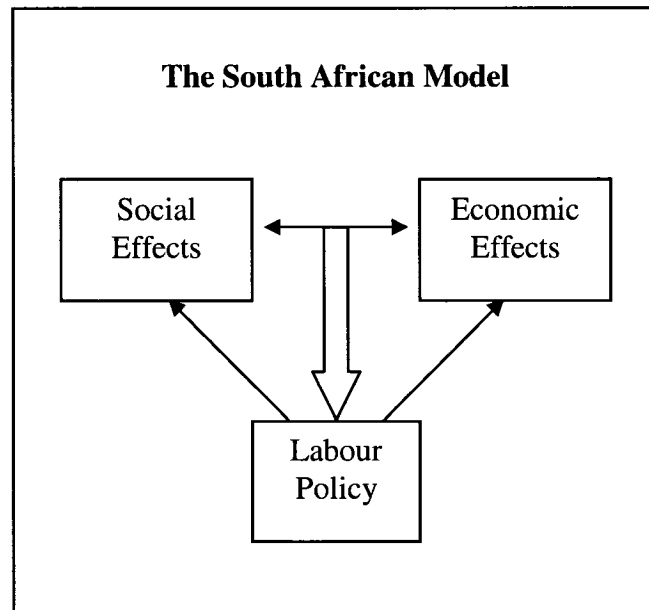
In examining how negotiations of race affect and, in turn, are affected by modern labour policy in South Africa, it becomes increasingly evident that no analysis could be complete without thorough historical contextualization. However, consideration of these issues in today's federal reports and media coverage tends to mostly reflect on two distinct periods: apartheid and post-apartheid (i.e. democracy). The problem with only looking at the last sixty years of South African development is that it negates the fact that initial contacts between indigenous South Africans and European traders and settlers did not produce an immediate and decisive shift toward the extreme social and physical racial segregation of apartheid. Put another way, colonialism was neither instant nor complete. It was a complex process involving gradual changes in the socio-political and economic sectors, the continuing overlap of which is critical in recognizing the pivotal function of race in the labour force today.

To understand how people respond to issues of race in modern South Africa necessitates looking at a bigger picture. In the words of David Hammond-Tooke, "what is needed is a clear sense of history, and an empathetic understanding of the different perceptions and resources available, both in the past and the present, to people coming from very different positions on the world stage" (1993:218). This involves going back to the first interaction between indigenous South Africans and the European traders and moving forward through time to understand what people are talking about today.

In a nation like South Africa, however, this is no simple task. While it was certainly not the only country to be colonized, it does have one of the starkest records of systematic and institutionalized racism. Its reputation for discrimination is not easily paralleled, particularly since it was legally sanctioned until recently (by historical measures). As this thesis is concerned with the views of workers toward race and its implications for policy and society, South Africa's history needs to be analyzed not only in terms of tracking social and ideological shifts regarding race and racism, but also the economic forces that accompanied them. Neglecting to do so would mean leaving out critical parts of South Africa's history. Kenneth Little supports this stance, confirming "race relations are, in effect, a function of a certain type of social and economic system" (1952:67).

In South Africa, the historical interplay between race and economics has necessitated the modern-day need for labour policies. In turn, the anthropology of policy seeks to understand how labour policies have both social (ideological) and economic impacts. [See Figure 1] It is important to acknowledge that problems of race today are not simply a continuation of some sort of irrational racism of white settlers as many writers have (inaccurately and dismissively) speculated. Deeper historical analysis shows that race does not exist in a vacuum, and therefore analyzing its place in South Africa involves a considerable amount of contextualization.

Figure 1



The following is by no means an exhaustive account of the nation's development, but it does attempt to consider the multiple forces that have combined to create the South Africa of today.

Early Contact (1652 – 1870)

In the years preceding South Africa's colonization by European settlers, the land was largely populated by the following indigenous groups: the Khoisan (made up of the San who subsisted by hunting and gathering, and the Khoikhoi who were nomadic herders), the Nguni-speaking cultivators and Sotho pastoralists (Feinstein 2005:13-16). The non-acquisitive subsistence practices of these groups meant their economic development was limited but stable, but as will be shown these were systematically and irrevocably changed by the arrival of European settlers.

Inevitably, these changes also altered the socio-political landscape of South Africa's indigenous population.

In 1652, Jan van Riebeeck was sent to South Africa by the Dutch East India Trading Company to set up a transfer point on the Cape of Good Hope for ships taking supplies to the East Indies. Originally there was no real interest in settling this area, which was being used as a supply base for passing ships. However, it quickly became evident that "the Company needed greater supplies than a handful of soldiers and sailors could produce from the gardens in Cape Town" (Feinstein 2005:1).

As volunteers started arriving from Holland to settle the region, they began to encroach on the traditional grazing lands of indigenous populations. For the first hundred years, expansion proceeded slowly, mostly on account of the Company's insistence on using the area just as a landing post. This does not, however, imply, that things progressed peacefully; under the best of circumstances, settlers compensated the local people less for their land than was agreed upon, but in many cases they just killed off native inhabitants where they felt cooperation (i.e. quiet defeat) could not be achieved (Feinstein 2005:22). In fact, "the tradition early took root among the men of the frontier that the Bushmen [San] were no better than wild animals and that it was justifiable to exterminate them like so much vermin" (Marais 1962:15). Many were also captured and forced into indentured labour, and only a minute fraction were able to continue traditional practices by moving to neighbouring countries. The violence that often erupted during encounters between Europeans and South Africans shows,

both the arrogance and aggression that Europeans were to display so frequently over the next three centuries, and also the innocence – and ultimately, despite much spirited resistance, helplessness – of indigenous people, when faced by the superior power and weaponry of newcomers who were always so ready to resort to the sword and the gun. [Feinstein 2005:16]

While such seemingly race-driven violence was not a particularly unique feature of the colonization process, it nonetheless raises the important questions, how and when did the superiority/inferiority dichotomy develop between settlers and locals? To understand this relationship means considering the roots of racist ideologies, which developed during the colonization process in the Americas over one hundred years earlier. At that time, Christianity was the dominant belief system of the Portuguese and Spanish settlers, and early colonies set up in the New World were originally committed to the conversion of indigenous populations to Christianity.

[The] period between the First Crusade and Columbus' discovery of America was characterized by the religious view of world order, and it established a pattern of dealing with non-Christian peoples which was to be continued—lacking only its religious motivation—to the present day. [Little 1952:63]

Initial religious pursuits were quickly superseded by capitalist motives, since “the new lands discovered in America provided ideal opportunities for economic exploitation and their native inhabitants were too weak to withstand the well-armed European settler-business man” (Little 1952:64). This created the serious challenge of finding a labour supply to fuel expansion in the colonies, compounded by the fact that a large part of the indigenous population had been wiped out by the introduction of European diseases. Africa was seen to be the ideal “source” of manpower since slaves were already being brought (on a smaller scale) from Northern Africa into Europe. Backed by the Catholic Church, the sale of African slaves to New World

colonies was encouraged, and “the usual condition was attached: all captives must be converted to Christianity” (Little 1952:64).

The pace of commerce increased relentlessly in America, and more and more slaves were shipped from Africa, often being treated inhumanely both during the passage and on the plantations. When word reached the Church, who disapproved of this seemingly un-Christian behaviour toward slaves, it presented a problem for the capitalists involved in the trade. In order to maintain their low costs (through severe exploitation), “they offered the ingenuous theory that Negroes were sub-human and incapable of moral feelings; hence there was no obligation to treat them like ordinary human beings” (Little 1952:65). Although Christian doctrine deems each person to be ‘equal in the eyes of God’, lack of religious belief or refusal to convert became the rationalization through which settlers justified the treatment of slaves as lesser beings.

Thus emerged the practice of dehumanization of non-Europeans, and particularly Africans, borne out of capitalist motives of expansion, control and profit. By the time European settlers arrived in South Africa, this legacy of discrimination had become deeply embedded over time and formed the basis of racist ideology that would be used to justify domination over indigenous populations.

The religious tones of these early slave trades would come to be echoed again among the *Boers* (the Afrikaans word for ‘farmers’) who were slowly moving inland to escape the harsh rules and restrictions of the Dutch Trading Company (which was still running the Cape colony under the limited conditions of a trade

post). Away from the base and living on sprawling farms far from administrative pressures, these people had,

A common code and ideology deeply rooted in the Calvinistic tradition of seventeenth-century Europe...The doctrine of predestination and the concepts of the eternally damned and the elect were a part of their social heritage to which they clung tenaciously. [Little 1952:68]

To maintain these beliefs meant the complete exclusion and suspicion of anyone outside the in-group. Religious purity and superiority were used as motivators not only for xenophobia, but also for the enslavement and extermination of indigenous people who did not share the settlers' beliefs. Conversely, those who stayed in the city lived with less convention and had greater exposure to the outside world, and therefore developed less rigid views on race and segregation. The large "Cape Coloured" population that still lives there, which was originally composed of children of both European and African parentage, is evidence of this phenomenon.

In 1806 Britain won control of the colony and lifted the restraints imposed by the Company (in an effort to increase trade). This, coupled with dissatisfaction with British policies, caused a significant number of Boers to move inland during a period known as the *Great Trek*. Between 1835 and 1843, over 12,000 Boers had moved from the Cape to the interior, taking over vast tracts of land. Inevitably, this created "conflict with Africans, and the wars to determine who controlled the land that had begun in the late eighteenth century...were continued during the mid-nineteenth century in the interior" (Feinstein 2005:31). (See Figure 2 at end of section.)

It must be understood that there is a significant socio-economic dimension to all these battles over land, and it arises from the complete incongruency between European and traditional land-holding practices. The territorial encroachment was

devastating to indigenous South Africans on two levels: first, the obvious loss of land physically infringed on their ability to maintain established subsistence practices; second, it forced them to accept a foreign system of land tenure, and indeed lifestyle:

[Indigenous groups] saw land as being held by the chiefs in trusteeship for their subjects and the idea of selling it was totally foreign to them. Ownership of land, in the western sense, was unknown. A married man, by virtue of the fact of allegiance to his chief, had inalienable rights to a field for each of his wives, and enjoyed undisputed occupation of these fields (including the right of passing them on to his sons), provided that he continued to work them effectively. [Hammond-Tooke 1993:215]

The extensive social restructuring that followed from this made any traditional way of life difficult if not impossible to maintain. This was further complicated by the fact that Boers, having laid claim to so much terrain, were in need of a labour supply to help them farm it. In response, they took over land at incredible rates. The logic was that,

The more land the settlers could seize and bring under their own control, the more they could deprive Africans of any means of survival other than the sale of their labour to white farmers and other employers. [Feinstein 2005:34]

Driven by their belief in racial superiority, the white farmers essentially left Africans with few options but to work for them. Pay often took the form of room and board (instead of monetary compensation), effectively creating a relationship of dependency and thereby guaranteeing continued labour.

This was closely followed by a series of laws enacted with the purpose of legally forcing Africans into agricultural labour. These practices and statutes culminated in the Natives' Land Act of 1913, which "made it illegal for Africans to acquire or rent any land outside the existing reserves" (Feinstein 2005:43). Overall,

opportunities for independent living came to be increasingly denied to the black populations.

The Mining Boom (1870 – 1948)

In 1870, diamonds were discovered in South Africa, followed shortly by gold in 1886. These events would prove to be critical in the country's modernization and "brought about radical changes in an economy which, till then, had been entirely agricultural" (Little 1952:69). Commercialized farming began to take the place of subsistence farming, transportation networks were constructed, communications were improved, and a high demand was placed on finding workers for these new industries. There was a "ubiquitous conviction [among] white settlers that manual work was not something they should perform" and therefore relegated such labour to black workers (Feinstein 2005:50).

It should also be pointed out that African women were particularly marginalized in terms of their labour potential, and those who were employed were generally consigned to domestic work or else the informal economy. They found ways to contribute to the economy and support their families, but were rarely officially recognized for their labour and faced severe discrimination and harsh working conditions. For this reason women (of all races) would come to be part of the "designated groups" of previously disadvantaged individuals (alongside Africans and the disabled) under current employment equity policies⁴.

⁴ While the role of gender in labour is acknowledged as being an important part of South Africa's history, this thesis is primarily concerned with issues of race in the workforce.

Accompanying this period of tremendous economic growth during the mining boom was the increasing pressure to find labourers to work in this sector. This was partially achieved by importing indentured labourers from India and China; by imposing a labour tax on black people who wished to live on territory owned by white settlers; and by using prison labour to build the roads necessary for increasing commercialization (Feinstein 2005:54). When even this did not meet labour demands in the mines, mine owners (backed by the government) turned to overt compulsion to ensure that black men would have little recourse but to work for white masters.

According to Little (2005), this happened in three stages. The first was the setting of taxes to a level just high enough to leave Africans with no recourse but to work in mines to be able to make payments. The next was even further limitation of land available to the struggling black farmers who had not yet been forced into labour, which effectively caused precisely that to happen. The last was the implementation of the notorious “pass laws”, used to ensure that black workers could only enter urban (i.e. “white”) areas if they could prove they were there to work, as indicated on their passes. Eventually these passes came to be a symbol of black resistance during apartheid when thousands of black South Africans staged protests across the country by turning in their passes to police and facing arrest. This culminated in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 where police opened fire on a group of peaceful, unarmed protesters, killing sixty-nine and injuring hundreds (Mandela 1994:280-281). Naboth Mokgatle, an activist who burned his pass in protest, proclaimed that “the pass denies the African privacy, choice, dignity, movement and

everything which makes him a man” (Mokgatle 1971:180). Thus we see the early models for the overtly racist policies of apartheid designed to subjugate the African masses and force them into working for white mine owners and employers.

These methods of coercing black South Africans into working on the mines were exacerbated by the inadequate wages they were paid and the harsh conditions under which they were forced to work. Furthermore, the implementation of formal colour bars (beginning in 1893 in the mining sector) denied black workers all but low-skill, manual labour, and prevented them from getting certification and training to perform any sort of managerial duties (Little 2005:74). It is clear that the intent behind all these policies was to use race as justification for the unequal division of labour to ensure that profit and power would remain in the hands of the white elite (and away from Africans) and that jobs for “the poor white” would be reserved and protected⁵. As Little puts it, “the fundamental reason for these restrictions was not the inability of Africans to undertake such work, but the desire of white miners to protect their jobs and their very large income differentials” (2005:75).

During this prosperous period of South Africa’s history, it seemed that nothing could stop the government from resorting to severe discriminatory measures in its effort to build up the labour supply. With gold and diamond excavations increasing, securing *cheap* labour was also a priority for the capitalists who had high stakes in South Africa’s economy. Enabled by racial discrimination, it was apparent that “cheap labour was the basis of this economy, and it explained much of the growth

⁵ According to Little, “the poor white” is defined as a “category of European [that] failed to find a secure foothold in the new economy, partly owing to the quick adaptation of the African to heavy manual and unskilled work [though not through choice, as we have seen], and the contempt with which Europeans came to regard such labour” (1952:70).

and dynamics of modern South Africa” (Worden 2000:3). It is also the reason that affirmative action policies would become necessary in order to even out these imbalances.

Like the colonists who arrived in the Americas, South Africa’s white settlers needed to dehumanize the black proletariat they had created in order to maximally exploit them for profit. Evidence of such racist rationalization and blatant disregard for humanity is clear in the following exchange that took place in 1897 between George Albu, the chairman of the Association of Mines, and the Commission of Enquiry, which concerned Albu’s proposal for reducing black workers’ wages by one-third to lower mining costs (as reproduced by Feinstein 2005:62):

Commission: Suppose the kaffirs⁶ retire back to their kraals⁷? Would you be in favour of asking the Government to enforce labour?

Albu: Certainly ... I would make it compulsory ... Why should a nigger be allowed to do nothing? ... I think a kaffir should be compelled to work in order to earn his living.

Commission: If a man can live without work, how can you force him to work?

Albu: Tax him, then...

Commission: Then you would not allow the kaffir to hold land in the country, but he must work for the white man, to enrich him?

Albu: He must do his part of the work of helping his neighbours.

Taking all this into account, it is clear that economic development alone was not responsible for systemic racial intolerance (i.e. it does not make sense to say that there is something inherently racist in economic growth); however, it could be argued that economic changes were nonetheless a catalyst to the discriminatory

⁶ *Kaffir* was commonly used as a derogatory term referring to black South Africans. Today its use is considered extremely offensive, and it is generally not accepted as an appropriate figure of speech.

⁷ *Kraal* is the Afrikaans word for an animal enclosure (such as a corral), and was also often used to describe a group of African huts.

policies of apartheid as they were repeatedly used to “justify” the racist ideologies which were steadily becoming institutionalized.

Apartheid (1948 – 1994)

Campaigning on a platform of *apartheid*⁸, D.F. Malan’s Nationalist Party was elected to office by white South Africans in 1948. Black people were, of course, barred from voting and so had no say in this process. The grim irony of this campaign was that although apartheid’s racist policies were touted as the only way to maintain and strengthen the economy, in fact they did just the opposite – GDP decreased while unemployment soared, and of course the low wages paid to black workers only served to bring down productivity by lowering morale. They saw “the poverty and deprivation of many Africans as an integral part of the South African industrial system” (Worden 2000:3). This approach, as well as the depletion of minerals (and inevitable reduction in mining), contributed to a completely unsustainable system.

In the end, “the government’s inability to prevent, or bring to an end, the economic downturn...was thus a major factor in the collapse of white rule and the transition to a government representative of all the people of South Africa” (Feinstein 2005:149). This process, coupled with pressure to abolish racist policies (expressed locally through large scale protests and internationally through sanctions), were what ultimately led to the government’s defeat.

Beyond the obvious economic failure of the apartheid government, however, was the high *social* cost of its discriminatory policies. The Population Registration

⁸ *Apartheid* is the Afrikaans word for, “separateness”, or “apartness”.

Act of 1950 forced non-white South Africans to be classified according to “race”; the groups included called “Black”, “Coloured” and “Indian” categories. The “Coloured” and “Indian” populations were given slightly higher treatment than the “Black”, but in many cases these labels were applied arbitrarily by white people and obviously left no room for ambiguity or variation. Immediately following this, the Group Areas Act forced members of these groups to move to specific areas, known as “homelands”, based on their “racial category” in an effort to keep them separated and contained (Feinstein 2005:150).

In addition to strict physical segregation, other measures taken against black South Africans included the banning of African political organizations, the removal of public funding from most African schools through the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the official exclusion of black workers from skilled labour and loss of all employee rights, and the strict division of public spaces – including the creation of “Whites Only” and “Blacks Only” facilities such as public entrances, restrooms, public transit and service offices (Feinstein 2005:150). Where public services needed to be shared, there were often separate counters for “Blacks” and “Europeans”, and in such cases the non-European [would] generally have to wait until all Europeans [had] been attended to (Little 1952:73).⁹

Clearly racism was deeply entrenched in apartheid policies and was made manifest in public life. The effects were devastating. Not only did the policies force millions of black people into poverty, but also the constant and widespread

⁹ Please see the section entitled “Now they queue with us” in Part III of the Ethnography chapter for a modern-day situation in which a white South African was extremely upset at having to wait in a queue behind black South Africans and not being shown preferential treatment.

oppression they experienced on a daily basis degraded the bulk of the population and made the practice of a traditional lifestyle all but impossible.

However, while social erosion was certainly a part of the government's program of discrimination, there was also another critical reason for the establishment of the apartheid system. The uneasiness that apartheid supporters felt at being a minority – and therefore outnumbered and vulnerable -- is a theme that is repeated throughout this study, and speaks to a lack of cultural integration even after hundreds of years of co-existence. It signifies that "apartheid was designed, above all, to sustain and strengthen racial separation in order to ensure white domination" (Little 1952:151).

In response, many underground resistance movements arose, organized by brave South Africans who held clandestine meetings (as it was forbidden for them to gather publicly) in order to exchange ideas, increase solidarity, and make plans for the future. The Black Consciousness Movement was one example of this, popularly seen as being spearheaded by Steve Biko, a freedom fighter who died at the hands of white police.¹⁰ Also, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) worked hard, often under dangerous conditions, to organize strikes, boycotts and protests against apartheid rule.

It was a tumultuous time in South Africa's history, marked by violence and extremely difficult conditions for the majority of the population. It is not really surprising that such a system could not sustain itself, and in fact "by 1986 many of apartheid's major economic institutions and policies had been dismantled" (Little

¹⁰ For further reading on the Black Consciousness Movement, please refer to "I Write What I Like" by Steve Biko.

1952:244). Of course, what was true “on paper” was far from what was true “in practice” (another recurring theme that arises throughout this thesis). In reality, racism was far from being a thing of the past in South Africa.

South Africa Today

Some would say that it is remarkable that the first truly democratic elections in South Africa, which ensured that every person (regardless of race) would be allowed to vote, were not brought about through civil war or other revolutionary measures. As Worden puts it, “the collapse of apartheid and the avoidance of a prolonged racial bloodbath was one of the major success stories of the late twentieth century” (2000:137).

This was due in great part to the example of diplomacy, patience and intelligence set by Nelson Mandela, the ANC leader who was elected president of South Africa in 1994 after twenty-seven years of imprisonment for anti-apartheid activism. It also reflects the will of the population to leave its violent history behind, and its longing for a society that is free, fair, and calls all people, regardless of their history, “Proudly South African”¹¹.

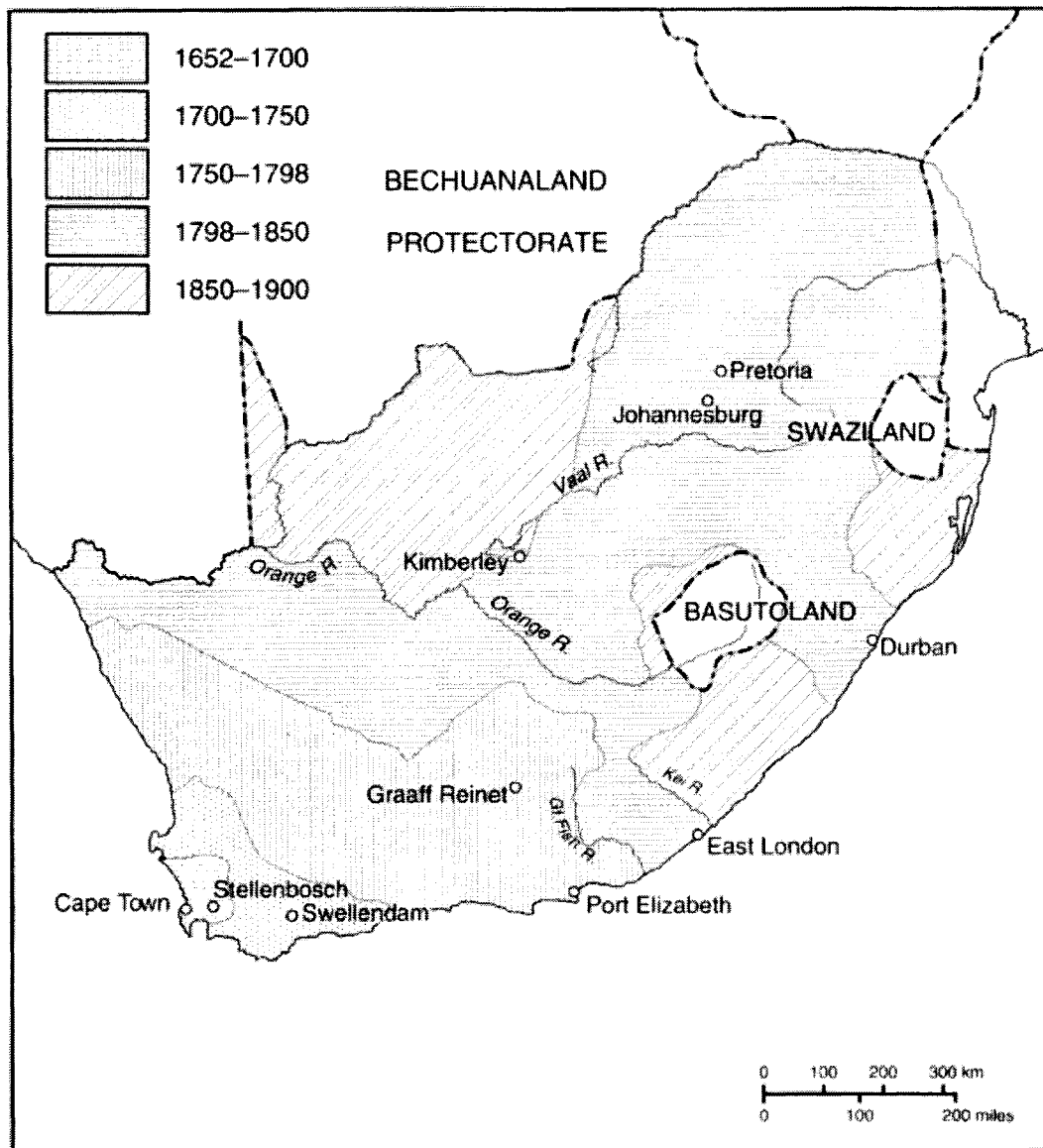
Today, just over a decade after the official abolition of the apartheid regime and the racially discriminatory policies it propagated, South Africa is still struggling not only to redress the injustice of the past, but also to pave the way for a future with equality as its driving principle.

¹¹ The “Proudly South African” campaign is a government initiative to “promote South African companies, products and services which are helping to create jobs and economic growth in our country” (Proudly South African 2006). The phrase is commonly used today as an expression of national pride and solidarity.

In addressing the former issue, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was “set up by the Government of National Unity to help deal with what happened under apartheid” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2001). It provided a forum for black South Africans to speak about injustices carried out against them during apartheid. It also granted amnesty to some perpetrators who voluntarily provided full disclosure of their involvement. All this was done to create an atmosphere of healing so justice could be carried out and people could move forward.

To ensure a future based on equality and tolerance, the government has put considerable effort into implementing legislation that addresses issues of racial discrimination, perhaps best exemplified by the Employment Equity Act of 1998. The affirmative action policies enshrined by this Act have been the subject of much debate in South Africa. The goal of such policies is to foster equality by setting principles to ensure that all people are treated equally in the workplace, regardless of race, gender or disability; however, there has been a very mixed response specific to the issue of race and labour. As will be shown by the ethnographic research conducted among present South African workers, there is considerable critique being generated with regard to these labour policies, implemented to address both economic and social concerns. These reflect clearly on current negotiations of “race” in society, and although South Africa has certainly come a long way in addressing these issues, the shifting role of “race” in the workplace continues to be highly problematic in the workforce (and all of South Africa) today.

Figure 2: Inland Movement by Boers, 1652-1900



Source: Feinstein 2005:32

Chapter 4: The New South Africa in Theoretical Perspectives

This chapter is concerned with theoretically contextualizing some of the ethnographic material in this paper by placing it within modern anthropological debates. It is a review of several theories and approaches, and will be drawing on Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's approach to critical anthropology, which considers the mutable boundaries of culture, place and power. Also, it will look at how the anthropology of policy can provide a new approach to modern issues in ethnography. This latter consideration of policy as a cultural category complements Gupta and Ferguson's approach in that both advocate 'studying through' the intersecting levels of meaning in people's lives – in this case, South Africans. In addition, the consideration of "race" and its role in ethnographic study will be discussed with respect to how its categories are experienced and interpreted by the participants.

Place, Power and Identity

Gupta and Ferguson point out that while anthropological theory has largely moved beyond the notion of 'culture' as a discrete and complete entity, this nonetheless leaves questions regarding the right approach to ethnographic practice (1997:3). They propose breaking down the method into two general issues: "the first of these centers on questions of place and the way that culture is spatialized, whereas the second deals with issues raised by relationships between culture and power" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:3).

Applying this approach to the South African context, we can begin by considering the interplay between culture and place. As a case in point, South Africa's government has, for several years, been using an advertising campaign revolving around the idea of a "New South Africa". Just what does this mean for the people of South Africa, however? How do they define their place within it? Gupta and Ferguson state the following:

Whatever associations of place and culture may exist must be taken as problems for anthropological research rather than the given ground that one takes as a point of departure; cultural territorializations (like ethnic and national ones) must be understood as complex and contingent results of ongoing historical and political processes. [Gupta and Ferguson 1997:4]

Functioning under the rubric of a "New South Africa", affirmative action policies are an example of the types of processes described above and are representative of the ideals of this national slogan – namely, South Africa as a modern, equal-opportunity nation. Such policies are a politicized attempt to reshape the social boundaries that have historically existed in South Africa with the intent of creating a new space free of racial discrimination. In her study of a Puerto Rican barrio in Philadelphia, Koptiuch described a similar process at play in that "the establishment of spatial meanings – the making of spaces into places – is always implicated in hegemonic configurations of power" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:8).

Thus the "New South Africa" slogan can be seen in this sense as a symbol of the attempts to develop a stronger, unified national identity while reinforcing a sense of equality. To be part of this new South Africa means accepting these values and incorporating them into daily life. However, as has been shown repeatedly throughout the ethnographic sections, the "New South Africa" is a much-contested

space; applying equity policies “on paper” has not been entirely effective “on the ground”. As one ominous headline read shortly after the official end of apartheid, “In the ‘New’ South Africa, a Bitter Past Lives On” (Thomsen 1995:1).

So how are these constructions of space and meaning being negotiated in South Africa? According to Gupta and Ferguson, “at a time when cultural difference is increasingly becoming deterritorialized... there is obviously a special interest in understanding the way that questions of identity and cultural difference are spatialized in new ways” (1997:3). South Africa presents a poignant example of this that lacks no subtlety: in almost all public domains in the country – restaurants, churches, nightclubs, etc. – there is a constant visible reminder of the racial divisions still present. While black South Africans now have access to all public arenas, the opportunities to observe white and black South Africans voluntarily socializing amongst each other in these spaces are limited and almost always an exception.

Turning to the ethnographic material, although everyone interviewed for this study identified as being South African, not all of them described sharing or wanting to share social connections with all other South Africans, and racial difference was often stated as the dividing factor. Therefore what becomes evident is that some people are positioning themselves and creating their own spaces in a new South Africa. As a result, these new spaces are much more complex than extend beyond the categories being used throughout equity policies.

To illustrate this further, Mary Crain’s study of a Spanish religious pilgrimage (1997) provides an interesting perspective on how this theory has been applied in a different context. Once an event isolated to the “local” population, the pilgrimage to

the Virgin of El Rocio is now undertaken by many tourists and “outsiders” on account of the media attention it has garnered. The response she observed by the locals was fascinating. She explains that on account of outside interest and participation in what they felt was “their” pilgrimage, local villagers attempted to change the focus of the pilgrimage to the route leading toward the shrine of the Virgin rather than the shrine itself (Crain 1997).

Additionally, certain locals further attempt to distinguish themselves from outsiders by referring to themselves as “Indians” and the visitors as “cowboys”. However, even among “locals” there are differences in response to these changes. According to Crain, “as an extreme reaction to the transformation, several pilgrims refused to participate in any of the shine-related activities and remained inside the brotherhood’s building the entire time” whereas others expressed a desire to extend the length of the pilgrimage (1997:302). Thus the process of contesting and defining their “place” is important in shaping people’s identities within this community of shifting boundaries.

A similar comparison can be drawn in South Africa. While many of the white males who were interviewed for this study were in favour of the transformation brought about by these policies, others resisted the structural changes occurring in the workforce. This was sometimes expressed through overt racism and the use of derogatory racial labels and stereotypes, while at other times shown through their fear of displacement, desire to leave the country, and resentment at the increased opportunities being given to black South Africans. Much like the Spanish villagers attempting to distinguish themselves from tourists to maintain a sense of local

'authenticity', some of South Africa's workers are once again seen constructing their place in the "New South Africa" by contesting or adopting the changes that are occurring there.

Following from this, we can now ask, if place and place making are in a constant state of creation and recreation, how are identity and identity making affected by such processes? According to Gupta and Ferguson,

By stressing that place making always involves a construction, rather than merely a discovery, of difference, ...identity neither "grows out" of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead, a mobile, often unstable relation of difference. [1997:13]

This means that the shifting relations that give form to place making are also present in the creation of cultural and individual identity. Gupta and Ferguson further argue that the politicized nature of these constructions of meaning invariably contributes to the transformation of power relations. In other words, "community" is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:13).

The legislation of policies is one way that the power dynamics of a community may be strongly affected and reshaped. For example, affirmative action policies attempt to negate racial prejudice by legally "levelling the playing field" for all South Africans, regardless of race. However, one of the inherent requirements (or "necessary evils" as it has been described by a number of participants) to achieve this goal necessitates the classification of all South Africans into racial categories in order to make such policies effective for those who stand to benefit from them. As a

result, “the subject is not simply affected by changing schemes of categorization and discourses of difference but is actually constituted or interpellated by them” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:12). Shore and Wright support this claim, stating that “policy increasingly shapes the way individuals construct themselves as subjects” (1997:4).

To illustrate this point, Figure 3 is an example taken from PNet, one of South Africa’s most prominent job search websites:

Figure 3: PNet Job Search Categories

The screenshot shows a 'Job Search' form with the following fields and options:

- Location :** A dropdown menu with 'SOUTH AFRICA' selected.
- Category :** A dropdown menu with '» ALL CATEGORIES' selected.
- Employment Equity :** A dropdown menu with 'All Vacancies' selected.
- Text Search :** An input field.

Below the 'Employment Equity' dropdown, there is a list of options: 'AA/EE Vacancies', 'Non AA/EE Vacancies', and 'All Vacancies'. The 'All Vacancies' option is highlighted.

For any given category of employment, the job seeker is given the additional option of choosing positions that are either open to everyone or positions that are only open to the designated groups in the Employment Equity Act. Specifically, the acronyms represent “affirmative action and employment equity” vacancies. Identification with a particular group thus becomes necessary before one can even proceed toward the appropriate lists of job choices. Of course, here the individual user may have some choice depending on which category he or she falls under – black South Africans could potentially seek jobs in the general listings if they did not wish to be identified by racial categories; white South Africans, however, do not have this choice. Here lies the frustration of some of the workers discussed in the

ethnography. This example thus demonstrates the potential of affirmative action policies to affect the construction of identity among South African job seekers and the meanings attached to it.

Watts cautions about the potential dangers of prescriptive endeavours to regulate social processes as presented by affirmative action legislation. He explores the idea that “because of the widespread tendency to take identities as self-evident or automatic, not enough scholarly attention has been paid to the frequent failure of projects that seek to map the construction of selves on to the creation of territorial or other sorts of “communities” (in Gupta and Ferguson 1997:14).

Again, the tensions that have been expressed by some regarding the negative effects of affirmative action policies indicate how identity can be shaped by power relations with consequences that may be inimical to the original intent of such laws, namely, racial equality. Following Watts’ recommendation for further study of such issues accurately puts the focus “on the complex and sometimes ironic political processes through which cultural forms are imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:5). To that end, if categorizing people based on race means that black and white South Africans feel pitted against each other in competing for work, then a reconsideration of such categories may be a future step for the improvement of affirmative action policies.

Anthropology of Policy

Turning now to a somewhat different approach, we see that “anthropologists have rarely turned their analytical gaze towards policy as a concept or cultural

phenomenon” (Shore and Wright 1997:7). This is surprising considering the tremendous impact of policy as a site for the construction of meaning, identity and power relations within communities. In today’s increasingly globalized world, consideration of these processes is more important than ever. Throughout the ethnographic material, blame has repeatedly been directed toward affirmative action policies for the creation of perceived problems with South Africa. How do such interpretations come to be formed and maintained, and what is their significance?

In South Africa and all over the world, “policy increasingly shapes the way individuals construct themselves as subjects” (Shore and Wright 1997:4). Certainly this is the case when it comes to applying for employment, as shown in the above example where applicants need to consciously choose their “racial affiliation” just to begin the job search.

However, “policy has a more diffuse impact when, through metaphors of the individual and society, it influences the way people construct themselves, their conduct and their social relations as free individuals” (Shore and Wright 1997:5). Referring to the section concerned with the effects of equity policies beyond the workplace, we can begin to see a corresponding theme. Some of the white participants were unhappy with the increasing numbers of black workers in the upper levels of the South Africa labour because they held the belief that black people were less competent than white people. This was expressed either through direct statements, avoidance of black colleagues, refusal to socialize with black South Africans, or other similar behaviour. More often, however, criticism was directed onto affirmative action policies for causing any number of problems instead of

blaming race explicitly. Shore and Wright claim, thought that “the objectification of policy often proceeds hand in hand with the objectification of the subjects of policy” (Shore and Wright 1997:5). Thus by using the *metaphor* of policy as a hook on which to hang their racist beliefs, some people appeared to avoid controversy by choosing to construct themselves as critics of governmental laws instead of as blatant racists.

This supports the idea that “through policy, the individual is categorized and given such statuses and roles as ‘subject’, ‘citizen’, ‘professional’, ‘national’, ‘criminal’ and ‘deviant’” (Shore and Wright 1997:4). It also resonates with the ideas put forth previously by Gupta and Ferguson on the construction of identity and the systems of meaning navigated in this process.

Nonetheless, during the course of fieldwork I was exposed to instances of overt racism on many occasions. I observed that in informal settings, some white South Africans tended to be much more likely to make derogatory comments in reference to black South Africans based directly on “race” rather than objectified ideas of “policy”. I also found these same people would usually be careful not to express such views in more formal situations, such as at work or in public settings where they could be overheard. Indeed, the abolition of apartheid ensured that racist behaviour constitutes an offence punishable by law. Therefore this apparent duality in behaviour could indicate the partial effectiveness of legislation to curb at least public racist discourse, if not racist beliefs. The fear of prosecution is one example of how governmental policy can potentially affect social processes. According to Shore and Wright,

We use 'governance' to refer to the more complex processes by which policies not only impose conditions, as if from 'outside' or 'above', but influence people's indigenous norms of conduct so that they themselves contribute, not necessarily consciously, to a government's model of social order. [1997:5-6]

From this we can agree that policies are, in fact, neither politically nor ideologically neutral objects on account of their ability to shape contesting negotiations of power and identity, as described earlier. What truly makes them a valid site for ethnographic research, however is that "not only do policies codify social norms and values, and articulate fundamental organizing principles of society, they also contain implicit (and sometimes explicit) models of society" (Shore and Wright 1997:7). Looking at the outward objectives of affirmative action policies, we are presented with a comprehensive outline for achieving a state of equality in South Africa. Even without yet reaching all its targets, the goals put forth by affirmative action reflect the values of a democratically elected government. Indeed, policies "can encapsulate the entire history and culture of the society that generated them" (Shore and Wright 1997:7). Had South Africa's history not been marred by a long period of systematic racial discrimination, there would not be the same need for policies to redress these issues of the past.

Yet there are implicit meanings within policies that may be interpreted in unexpected ways. These perhaps have more to do with their interpretation since they involve "reading between the lines". For example, in the section dealing with South Africa's business owners, the concept of "fronting" is introduced. Although it has been repeatedly pointed out by various participants that this practice is not only illegal but is also a flawed business tactic, some people have nonetheless

considered or attempted this option, feeling that the alternatives were less manageable. Therefore although fronting is in no way outwardly advocated in the legislation, it has at times manifested as a by-product of the policy's weakness in fully addressing the needs of small business.

For ethnographers, studying these explicit and implicit models can be a revelatory approach. In this case, "the key is to grasp the interactions (and disjunctions) between different sites or levels in policy processes" (Shore and Wright 1997:14). It is at these points of intersection that we can come to better understand how people come to shape their identities and also find meaning within the world they occupy.

Anthropology and Race

The concept of race has been at the heart of much debate in the social sciences, since "as a way of categorising people, race is based upon a delusion because popular ideas about racial classification lack scientific validity and are moulded by political pressures rather than by the evidence from biology" (Banton & Harwood 1975:8). Thus race has widely been labeled as a social construct and in some instances abandoned as a legitimate area of study for fear of being interpreted as biological determinism. However, as Sanjek (1994) points out,

To contemporary anthropologists, none of this scaling is "real," though it has been real enough in its consequences. Race has become all too real in its social ordering of perceptions and policies, in the pervasive racism that has plagued the globe following the 1400s. [Sanjek 1994:15]

Faye Harrison (1995), further notes that the legitimacy of "race" has become so contested in anthropology that it has in many ways dropped out of

anthropological discourse as a legitimate area of study. However, inasmuch as biological determinism has been all but abandoned within the discipline and race has come to be understood as a social construct,¹² we still cannot avoid the fact that it is this very construct that entire communities, cultures and even nations are nonetheless both defined and divided by. It was this premise that inspired our anthropological predecessors to set out in attempts to track and categorize the bases of such divisions and the meanings behind them.

As we progressed into an era of political correctness, however, race widely came to be seen as an unqualified zone of distinction, and counter to the promotion of equality among the general human population. Yet South Africa stands as a counterexample to these efforts; with all the political investment in the institutional eradication of racial barriers, race is still understood in common discourse to be a very real criterion of differentiation. It is the term with which people communicate and is a normalized part of the national dialogue. Hartigan (2006) reinforces that in too quickly dismissing race as a social construct, we run the risk of alienating the people who nonetheless believe in what they perceive as racial markers and therefore fail to engage with them on this relevant theme.

Race further shapes people's identities and becomes one of the contested sites around which communities are joined or divided. Therefore, while race is not "real" in biological terms, it is very much real in its consequences. To assume otherwise among people for whom race is a lived reality is to ignore the socio-political processes that shape their daily lives.

¹² This was largely thanks to Boas' innovative work on "ideological racism" that marked a notable shift away from "racial determinism".

In addition, in order to redress past injustices, race needs to be recognized as having played an important role in determining how South Africans were governed and consequentially affected by race-based policies. The unjust laws enforced by the system of apartheid serve as prime examples of how racial categorization can be made manifest in extreme ways, including but not limited to the following:

The conversion of racial segregation into a biblically deprived moral project; the splintering of Africans into “independent tribal states”; the disenfranchisement of “coloureds”; the categorical denial that Africans would ever qualify for citizenship; zealous attempts to enforce submission to a highly regimented state; and attempts to “perfect” racial segregation in every sphere. [Evans 1997:5]

All things considered, the denial of race by anthropologists shuts out opportunities for a very relevant and practical area of study, the neglect of which in this thesis especially would mean a misguided rewriting of historical development. As an alternative approach, Hartigan proposes that we instead focus on a “cultural” framework for understanding how race comes to define and gain meaning within communities. He suggests the following:

Rather than worry about whether “social construction” claims are rendered tenuous or dubious by recent genetics research, we need to be more assertive about the often too obvious fact that race is a function of cultural dynamics that are learned and, hence, can be unlearned as well. [Hartigan 2006:3]

Applying this approach to the South African context, we see that following the official abolishment of apartheid, the government of South Africa was suddenly faced with a black majority who had previously been denied anything but low-level and menial labour and were ready to take their position as colleagues and equals to the minority white elite in the workforce. Considering that approximately three-quarters

of South Africa's population is black, it is clear that considerable restructuring would be necessary in order to successfully integrate this group into the labour force.

However, simply changing old laws or enacting new ones does not mean they will be readily incorporated on a practical or ideological level, as has been brought up repeatedly throughout the ethnographic sections. Convincing people that employment equity is in everybody's best interest can be difficult, particularly if they feel their job security is being threatened. In the words of a prominent, black South African transport company director, when implementing affirmative action, "the first thing that you have to do is take people out. That is never an easy thing" (Saki Macozoma in Logan 1998:3).

As shown by the white South Africans who feel their job positions are being threatened by the increasing numbers of black workers entering the labour force and also those who resort to "fronting", encountering a resistant attitude is not entirely unexpected. From these examples it becomes evident that race is one of the major forces shaping the identities of South Africans. Therefore, "to ignore it is to do a disservice to the scholarship which has preceded us, as well as to stand as fools before our students and the general public" (Johnston 2004:5). The consideration of race as a legitimate area of study, much like the analysis of policy as a cultural category, is therefore intrinsic to better understanding the experiences of South Africans and their negotiations of affirmative action policies.

The RACE Project is a special venture by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) concerned specifically with the treatment of race and related issues within the discipline of anthropology, as well as providing information to the

general public. As its mission, it puts forth that, “Looking through the eyes of history, science and lived experience, the RACE Project explains differences among people and reveals the reality – and unreality – of race” (American Anthropological Association 2007). To that end, it has called on several leading scholars in the discipline to contribute their papers and insights to the project. Echoing themes introduced throughout this thesis, Johnston (2004) and Smedley (2007) focus on analyzing the roots of racist ideology, particularly in relation to the United States, whereas Hartigan (2006) continues to struggle against biological arguments for racism.

One of the important questions put forth by the AAA project, however, asks whether people should be grouped according to race. By challenging the readers to consider how they determine who belongs to what racial group, the project shows the spectrum of variation that can exist among people of all “races”, demonstrating the impossibility of creating unambiguous or universal racial categories. It furthermore suggests that “when we assign people to groups based on skin color or other physical features, we lose information about who they are as individuals” (American Anthropological Association 2007).

Writing on this theme, Eison Simmons spent time in the Dominican Republic conducting ethnographic research. She describes one exercise in which she asked a group of her students from the U.S. to indicate to what “race” they felt they belonged. This was an uncomfortable process for many of the students, most of whom acknowledged the “social construction” of racial categories. Nonetheless, they were eventually able to identify themselves as being either white or black.

In discussing the racial system in the Dominican Republic with her students, many were surprised to hear that the locals would not necessarily identify themselves as being “black”; for the American students, the locals’ skin colour appeared to be an obvious indicator of race. As Eison Simmons explained, however, the locals did not have any associations or connections to that particular racial marker, which she described as a reflection of what they had been *taught*.

This exercise was used to introduce her research, which is focused on the process of how we come to *know* what racial category we belong to. In explaining this phenomenon, Eison Simmons uses the concept of *racial enculturation*, described as “a process by which we come to understand and internalize racial definitions and concepts” (Eison Simmons 2006:3). According to her, “these ideas are reinforced throughout society, especially in families, schools, religious institutions and among peers” (2006:3). She stresses the importance of looking at race as a lived experience to which we are constantly assigning meaning through our various daily interactions.

In conducting research in a country like South Africa where race is such a highly politicized issue, it becomes important to consider Eison Simmons’ approach to enculturation and “knowing race”. During apartheid, black South Africans were grouped by white bureaucrats into various racial categories for monitoring purposes. These choices were often determined arbitrarily based on abstract factors such as physical features or geographical location. In some families, blood relatives were sometimes even deemed to be different “races”, so that, for example, a brother and sister may come to be defined as “black” and “coloured”, respectively.

Today, affirmative action policies in South Africa also assign labels to workers in order to identify the recipients of the policies. Now the goals of such categorization are much less insidious than during apartheid, with the intent being to benefit black workers instead of to control them. Nonetheless, the process still involves the application of racial labels to the general population, thereby influencing the ways in which people construct their identities vis-à-vis the policy guidelines.

This is where ethnographic research has shown to be insightful by helping us understand how people come to *know* who they are and the social groups with which they choose to associate. Through their narratives, the South Africans who participated in this research were able to discuss the various influences shaping their identities, thereby revealing a rich and complex process of enculturation.

One example is Faith, a young, black woman who has a successful career as a financial analyst for a large firm in Johannesburg. Faith was born in Soweto, one of the poorest townships on the edge of Johannesburg. Nonetheless, she was able to finish high school and because of her excellent grades, the company where she is currently employed offered her a bursary to pay for university costs under the condition that she would come to work for them upon graduating. This programme, designed by the company to invest in graduates so that they will be properly qualified to work for them, enabled Faith to earn a university degree at the University of Witwatersrand, a highly reputable institution in Johannesburg.

Since graduating, Faith has spent the last ten years working at the company and feels pleased with her position. Since the company pays her decently, she has

been living for several years in one of Johannesburg's more affluent neighbourhoods where she owns her own house and drives a new BMW.

However, Faith's mother continues to live in Soweto, and Faith admitted that while she attempts to visit her every few weeks, her mother rarely comes to her home in the suburbs. In addition, Faith seemed to take pride in saying that she is more comfortable being in Soweto than "in the city". However, she lives well above the means of an average Soweto resident, who is unlikely to have basic services such as plumbing and heating and may share a small shack with several family members. Indeed these are the conditions in which she said her mother lived.

Near the end of our interview, Faith admitted to feeling as though she lives "in two worlds". She mentioned that she did not maintain relationships with many members of her old community who now consider her to be an "outsider" because she lives in relative luxury. Since she is no longer part of their "struggle", her lived reality more closely resembles that of an average white, middle class suburban dweller. Nonetheless, without being targeted through programmes designed to integrate black workers into the labour force, she would likely still be living in much more modest conditions in the townships.

Through this example it becomes clear that although Faith was raised in a "black" community to which she still feels a strong emotional attachment, her change in lifestyle has meant she is no longer identified as being an "insider" by her original community and that she herself feels simultaneously included in and excluded from both "white" and "black" communities. In listening to her narrative, the intricate

process of enculturation reveals the complex ways in which her racial identity has been negotiated and shaped. Eison Simmons summarizes,

As anthropologists, we have much to offer in terms of current debates and discussions surrounding race in classrooms, in politics and in the media. By interrogating race as lived experience, we recast it as being complex and historically and contemporaneously significant in the lives of people. [2006:4]

By engaging with people, like Faith, in the fieldwork setting, we therefore come to understand more thoroughly the ways in which they manoeuvre the social system and find meaning through everyday interactions. These important processes would remain unexplored if we simply assigned racial categories to people, as is the practice of affirmative action policies. Without accounting for the complexities of human variation, such policies may be weakened by their need to establish firm racial categories and the impossibility of achieving this goal in absolute terms.

Researching South Africa

A literature review covering issues of race and labour in South Africa would not be complete without a survey of some of the pertinent contemporary anthropological studies of Southern Africa. It is here that anthropologists have a responsibility to develop understanding of how layers of meaning are created and reproduced among the various social systems, particularly in light of the conflict with which many African nations are struggling. Bond eloquently proposed the challenge for Africanist anthropology as follows:

In the present situation of contemporary Africa, anthropologists have no choice but to be concerned scholars oriented toward understanding the main social problems of the day. They have the obligation to confront history and to situate themselves within it as responsible scribes, analysts, and theoreticians concerned with the physical and social forces that structure

society and create the human condition. They must become actors in the production of their own histories, establishing, maintaining and preserving domains open to intellectual debates, critical assessments and practical evaluations of social and political paradigms, domains in which there is the possibility for innovative thought and the potential for responsible praxis. [Bond 2002:2]

Jean and John Comaroff's work has been especially critical and influential in furthering the challenge posed by Bond. Of particular relevance for my own project is a recent collection of essays edited by the Comaroffs entitled, "Law and Order in the Postcolony" (2006). Throughout these papers, the contributors explore the argument that "social disorder, expressed in elevated rates of criminality, is in the nature of transition itself, that it inevitably follows epochal changes in the order of things" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:2).

Like many countries moving away from outdated modes of colonial rule toward democratic and egalitarian governance¹³, South Africa has experienced elevated levels of crime and violence since the end of apartheid. The Comaroffs explain that escalation in crime "is not merely a reflex, antisocial response to poverty or joblessness, scarcity, or other effects of structural adjustment, important though these things are" (2006:4-6). In addition to these factors, they argue that Western organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) often contribute to the problem of increased crime through "demands on postcolonies to cleave to market principles and to deregulate in ways that privilege the private sector over the state" (2006:4).

Such institutions, in their "neo-colonial quests" to capitalize on the resources of the postcolonies, come to "interfere with indigenous means of producing wealth,

¹³ African and Latin American examples were most often cited in discussing this phenomenon.

recruiting local functionaries, brokers, even warlords, to facilitate their enterprises, often by extremely questionable means” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:8). The result is an increasing number of criminals who are creating a “simulacra of social order” by reorganizing methods of production and distribution along illegal channels; criminal activity effectively strengthens the informal economy by operating outside the licit norms established by government policies. Thus despite undergoing shifts toward democratization, many countries are left struggling with foreign structural adjustment plans while attempting to control the rising levels of lawlessness that they create. The implication is that “lawlessness often turns out to be a complex north-south collaboration” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:8).

On account of its soaring crime rates since the end of apartheid, South Africa is an excellent example of what is referred to as “dis/order in the postcolony”. Prior to 1994, “levels of crime under apartheid were high, although they often remained unseen and unrecorded given their concentration among poor and black communities” (Shaw 2002:1)¹⁴. Since that time, however, statistics indicate increasing rates in most types of crimes, particularly violent crimes. For example, in the 2003-2004 year there were 280 942 reported cases of common assault in South Africa as compared to 200 248 in 1994-1995 (Institute for Security Studies 2007:1).

Clearly there is a marked increase in crime from the start of the transition to democracy through the years following it. According to the Comaroffs, “a decade after the end of apartheid in South Africa, the poor and the marginal still look sceptically upon statutes protecting the rich: a large proportion of them see crime as

¹⁴ Attempts to access South African statistics verify that there is very little documentation on crime prior to 1994.

an acceptable means of redistribution” (2006:11). Indeed problems of crime and violence in South Africa were broached by many of the people interviewed throughout this thesis and also shaped the methodological approach to this study. These perceived dangers structure the daily routines and interactions of South Africans by creating an atmosphere of wariness and tension in even the most mundane activities. As people’s narratives have shown, there is a general sense among many Johannesburg residents that the threat of criminal danger is always present. Past and potential criminal incidences are routinely discussed among residents as well as being splashed across local media headlines. In effect, the increases in crime rates following apartheid have been the focus of increasing anxiety and concern as expressed among the general public, in government and throughout the media.

Using the term “fetishism of the law”, the Comaroffs describe this preoccupation with legality with which South Africans are living today and how crime has come to be increasingly politicized. According to them,

Violent crime, here as in the United States, has become the lightning rod for an escalating range of everyday anxieties, which are fed by the insecurity of the privileged as they witness the anger and impatience of those excluded from the Promised Land. In the banal theatrics of the mass media, crime becomes racialized and race criminalized. [Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:275-276]

The implications of this phenomenon, especially the latter concept regarding the relationship between crime and race, are particularly relevant to this study. They indicate that the media often contributes to the notion that victims and perpetrators can be demarcated along racial lines, thereby propagating racist stereotypes. The portrayal of violence and crime as racialized phenomena builds on xenophobic fears

and detracts from the possibility of meaningful integration. However, applying the Comaroffs' ideas on the often-violent nature of postcolonial societies, we can now see lawlessness in the postcolony beyond its "stereotypes of underdevelopment, abjection and sectarian strife" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:11). Instead, we come to understand it as an amalgamation of the historical, economic and political processes that are shaping the social systems of the modern South Africa.

Bearing all this in mind, we can now consider some other debates being generated by anthropologists committed to research in Africa. Borrowing a phrase coined by Thabo Mbeki, the "African Renaissance" represents a movement by Africanist anthropologists who are seeking to understand the ways in which modern social movements are attempting "to restore the dignity of an African past, to overcome present inequalities and to construct communities based on 'genuine' African liberation" (Bond 2002:2).

One such example was a study conducted by Henk Pauw (2002) on a development project run by the government that commenced in 1988 and subsequently failed before achieving its goals. Given the time period during which it was initiated, Pauw points out that racial tensions were an important factor in the project's eventual demise. He explains that "Black participants... felt that Whites were financially mismanaging the project and trying to trick them" (2002:203). This corruption in financial matters and a general lack of transparency from project managers resulted in the accumulation of debt as well as many participants leaving the project, and its eventual termination in 1995.

Pauw uses this example to show the importance of considering “who ought to be involved in decision-making”, as reflected in the title of his paper. His study reveals that development projects are unable to function properly unless they are fully democratized. According to Pauw, “the strengthening of democracy is stated as one of the tasks of the African Renaissance” so that Africans have equal participation in development projects (2002:192). He sees this transition to democracy in South Africa as imperative for the successful implementation of policies and future empowerment projects.

Bond also supports the idea that “democracy should be the keystone of the political order” (2002:3). He uses the concept of an “African Renaissance” to examine social crises such as war, poverty and violence, which he believes can only be remedied through the empowerment of Africans to make their own decisions without outside interference. This fits into the Comaroffs’ theory that outside interference from major players in the “global economy” leads to increased internal conflict within African nation-states.

Other scholars in the field have echoed the focus on conflict research in Africa. Porter proposes a tri-goal approach that includes “the empowering of African people, the building of human capacities that allow people to flourish, and the realization of a just peace where research on violent conflict ceases to be necessary” (2005:164). The importance of local empowerment is once again understood to be an important step toward easing conflict.

As a foundation for such goals, Dolby (2001) focuses on education as a space of meaning-making for concepts of “race” and “culture”. Her year-long study

was conducted among a group of youth in a Durban high school¹⁵. In her effort to probe what potentially lies ahead for South Africa's new generations, Dolby examined the ways that racial conflict was expressed among the students since the end of apartheid. She observed that although "students may, on the surface, appear to be ignoring (or, on a good day, tolerating) those who are racial 'others,' they are actually furiously working to ensure that race persists (Dolby 2001:81). The narratives of some people interviewed for this thesis indicate that the behaviour Dolby describes among youth in schools often comes to be reproduced among adults in the workplace as they respond to the incorporation of South Africa's previously disadvantaged groups in the labour force.

Instead of focusing on assumptions that "race" is a given set of beliefs and practices, however, Dolby is interested in how attempts to make connections across racial boundaries are constantly shaping and redefining the students' meanings of "race". To this end, Dolby "engage[s] how race is produced in a particular situation, how it is explained, circulated, and reproduced, and how as a construct it interfaces with various structures of power" (2001:112). She also echoes Gupta and Ferguson's (1997) interest in exploring the "process of production of difference" within diverse but interconnected spaces. For the youth in Dolby's study, attempts to bridge racial divides were often achieved through shared interest in music and dance. Similarly, the various strategies utilized by South Africans in the workforce, such as voluntary employment of black workers, implementation of training programs and use of ratings agencies to achieve empowerment goals, may also be

¹⁵ Durban is the city with the second highest population in South Africa.

indicative of shifts toward racial tolerance. Such efforts to adopt an integrative approach reveal the complexity of the processes affecting the construction of race.

In terms of how this knowledge may be incorporated in the education of young South Africans, Dolby proposes that “instead of sending students on a journey to find out who they are, we need to deepen students’ understanding of the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of difference” (2001:117). The hope is that helping children understand that attitudes toward race are always constructed and constantly shifting ensures that they will be better prepared to deal with the diversity of people they will encounter throughout their lives by not being tied to outdated racial assumptions and stereotypes. Deegan (2001) confirms that “in order for a society to move away from past prejudices communal understanding between communities needs to be initiated” (2001:159). In South Africa and perhaps many other African nations, the early education of youth in matters of race and tolerance may therefore be a positive step toward dealing with the conflicts that have arisen out of years of racial discrimination and have been compounded by a sudden thrust into a newly democratized state.

Chapter 5: Ethnographic Analysis

The ethnographic data collected for this paper has been organized into three sections to demonstrate both the unique and shared experiences of the participants in different sectors of society: as workers, as business owners, and as members of a society that is attempting to bring about racial equality through the implementation of affirmative action policies.

Part I – South Africa’s Workers

“From one extreme to another” – Introduction

The participants in this study often expressed differing opinions toward the perceived successes and failures of affirmative action policies, and indeed many have pointed out that it is impossible to simply praise or criticize them since their impacts are complex and multi-dimensional. This was a theme that I was able to discuss at length with Sfiso, a young, black South African employed as an insurance worker in charge of overseeing his company’s employee benefits.

I met Sfiso after one of his coworkers whom I interviewed suggested that he would be an interesting person to speak with as part of my research. This proved to be true and Sfiso has provided me with a great deal of insight throughout this research project, speaking honestly and eloquently about his experiences in the workforce. After our initial interview, I was invited on several occasions to his home in a recently constructed gated community where he lives with his wife and their newborn son. Besides sharing hours of conversation about my research, Sfiso

provided me with transcripts of speeches given by his company leaders, interesting South African documentary films and other relevant reading material.

In exchange, I would help him by using my computer and scanner to copy his photographs onto discs, as Sfiso is an amateur photographer and has taken a large number of pictures to document what he refers to as “life in South Africa”. Over a period of several years, Sfiso has visited diverse settings such as local landmarks, university campuses and several different cities, as well as having attended traditional ceremonies, political protests, weddings, school and various other gatherings. During that time he has gathered an impressive collection of snapshots portraying everyday life in South Africa. Each picture had its own story, and Sfiso’s narratives revealed fascinating insights into the places, events and people that he has seen. They also showed a deep appreciation of the diversity of South African people through the wide range of focal points evident throughout his photos.

As a student, Sfiso had been involved as a “political commissioner” for a university organization dedicated to fighting apartheid rule. During that time, he had attended protests against the unjust treatment of black South Africans and rallied for “growth and diversity”. Occasionally he had even been arrested for this type of involvement, but said that he “loved it” because he “[doesn’t] see it as criminal to be intellectual”. A self-labelled “nonconformist”, Sfiso said that he did not like to be “chained to the desk” and was always looking for ways to make his work interesting. He said that in many ways, choosing his own career path takes precedence over money, so he actively sought out training and certificate programs within his company so that he could stay “ahead of the game”.

Sfiso said that he started working at his current company as a communications officer, claiming to have secured the position “by luck” because nobody else wanted it. He took the job because of what he calls his “long term vision”; having received a university degree in industrial psychology, Sfiso said, “my degree prepared me to think, and I saw my willingness to learn as a great resource”. It appears that this has been an effective tactic as he has been granted several promotions since joining the company ten years ago and enjoys the position he currently holds.

Stemming from the political beliefs he developed as a student, Sfiso is a strong supporter of diversity in the workplace. He nonetheless had some criticism of the policies implemented to achieve those goals. According to him, “affirmative action can work brilliantly, but it can also make problems.”

This section of the thesis is concerned with giving voice to the ways in which some South African *workers*, like Sfiso, have responded to equity policies and how that reflects on negotiations of race. It thereby attempts to move away from flat judgements of such policies by considering instead the many-faceted experiences of the workers interviewed in this study.

To begin, I would like to consider the stories recounted to me during separate interviews with two participants during my fieldwork. The first is Beth, a senior human resources advisor in a public works company with a background in accounting. Throughout our discussion Beth referred to herself on several occasions as being “black”. She was born in Zambia and moved to South Africa in 1990, just prior to the official abolition of apartheid. She explained that she had a

very difficult time at first because she was not seen as “a normal black South African” on account of her accent (which was affected by several years of study in England). She told me that she applied for a job upon her arrival in Johannesburg and was contacted, by telephone, by a prospective employer. According to Beth, “when they heard my [British] accent, they invited me for an interview.” However, when she showed up, she was told, “Sorry, we weren’t aware you’re black” and was immediately dismissed without any other criteria (such as her qualifications) being considered.

In comparison with Beth is Next is Patrick,, a mid-thirties “white” male who is a journalist for a medium-sized publishing company specializing in Information Technology (IT). He spoke with me about the changes he experienced in South Africa the three years following the 1994 elections which saw a black government come into power for the first time. He had been working for an independent electoral commission at the time and was in need of a new job. Applying to many different places, Patrick said he was repeatedly told, “Sorry, wrong colour.” This made him angry because he knew he could do the jobs but was not given the chance because he was “white”. According to him, after apartheid “the situation in South Africa went from one extreme to another.”

From each of these accounts, it is apparent that race and labour have been intertwined issues in South African discourse and practice for a long time. Policies that once sought to keep black workers out of the workforce have been overturned and replaced by new policies aimed at equalization of opportunities. This change

has taken place over a relatively short time span, as Beth and Patrick's experiences indicate. In the words of Steyn,

This is one of those moments in a historical process where change is so far-reaching, but also so accelerated, that one may catch the process of social construction 'in the act,' as South Africans shape narratives of social identity that will provide bearings in previously uncharted waters. [2001:xxii]

All countries have struggled with legislating employment policies, but South Africa's history of severe racial discrimination has produced a special set of circumstances with regard to labour policy. Affirmative action was implemented to rectify these injustices, and while numerically there is now a higher representation of black South Africans in the workforce than before, the social repercussions of this have produced a whole new set of implications for "race" in the nation.

Returning once again to the premise of this chapter, I would like to look in some detail at the main issues raised by workers who participated my participants regarding what they perceive to be the main issues affecting them on account of affirmative action policies.

"Now blacks are doing this" – Affirmative Action As "Reverse Racism"?

I have mentioned that some of the most interesting information I collected arose from spontaneous discussions outside of the formal interview settings. A case in point, briefly introduced in the opening chapter of this thesis, is a series of conversations I had with my friend Rebecca and her parents Jan and Corienne, at their home on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Like most middle-class South African families, Jan and Corienne owned a comfortable, spacious home complete with a luxurious swimming pool and beautiful gardens. Afrikaans was the language spoken

in the home, meaning the family was of Dutch descent. Each family member drove his or her own car, and Rebecca, like her older sister, had been living on her own for several years upon completing university studies. Her family was always welcoming toward me and I visited their home on several occasions. We would often talk about my research, and in fact Jan and Corienne's experiences in the workforce, as they narrated them to me, greatly influenced me to undertake this study.

One particular day when Rebecca and I drove out to her parents' home, I was having a chat with Jan and Corienne about my general impressions of South Africa and was asked whether I would consider settling there. This turned to a discussion about Rebecca's parents' Jan and Corienne's experiences of raising a family in South Africa and some of the difficulties that came with it. While they enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, each family member has been a victim of crime at some point in their life¹⁶. According to them, however, it was not the threat of crime so much as Jan's extended period of unemployment that has significantly affected their lifestyle. It turned out that five years earlier, Rebecca's father Jan had lost his job (which he described as being a "management position") had been unable to find employment since. The couple He and Corienne took turns telling me the story of how after seventeen years with the same company, Rebecca's father Jan had been given a severance package without any option of disputing the loss of his job. He was forced to accept and leave with very little notice since the only other option was to leave with nothing at all.

I have no way of knowing the official reasons given by the company for the dismissal, but Rebecca's parents Jan and Corienne speculated that the upper-level

¹⁶ This theme is examined in further detail in Part 3 of the Ethnography chapter.

position had to be vacated in order for a “black worker” to fill it in accordance with the affirmative action policies that were being increasingly implemented at that time. Because of his age and race, Rebecca’s father Jan had a difficult time finding a similar position with another company. It seemed that no body wished to hire somebody who would be retiring within a few years while there were new generations of workers with fresh training coming, in, compounded by laws requiring black workers to be where before only white applicants were considered.

As I came to find out, the circumstances around Jan’s employment were not exceptional given current hiring practices in South Africa. Recent figures indicate that “more than 80 percent of the positions being advertised give employment equity (EE) preference” (Clarkson and Jovanovic 16:2004). During interviews, other participants provided additional examples of this type of phenomenon. Luigi, who deals with risk assessment in the insurance department of Eskom (the local energy supply company) voiced a similar experience, saying that “as a white male over the age of forty”, he felt he “would have no career prospects” if he were to leave his present position. James worked with Luigi at company and remarked to me in a separate interview that he believed that as a white employee, he could not get a higher position because the company “only wants blacks, coloureds, and Indians”¹⁷. In yet a different sector altogether was David, a 53-year old white male who had owned a pharmaceutical company. He described being grateful that he had been able to run his own company and retire early since he “realize[s] it wouldn’t be easy to get a job now.”

¹⁷ According to the Employment Equity Act, these groups fall under the category of “black people”, which is a “designated group”.

The stories of all these men indicate how they are feeling the pressures of equity policies in various ways. According to Org Geldenhuys, head of a recruitment company, “the demand for black candidates is being driven by companies needing to get their equities right, to fall in line with government policies... The flip side is that the demand is slim for senior white male skills” (Clarkson and Jovanovic 2004:16). In Rebecca’s family, Corienne continues to be the sole provider in the home since Jan lost his job. Although they admit that this change took a great deal of adjustment and was coupled with uncertainty about how they would pay for their daughters’ educations, in observing their daily routines both Jan and Corienne appear to have adapted well to their circumstances; the family enjoys a good standard of living with Corienne working outside the home and Jan taking care of many of the household responsibilities.

While speaking with the family about these experiences, I was first introduced to the concept of affirmative action as “reverse racism”, a phrase that I was to hear repeatedly throughout my research. This is the idea that affirmative action policies target and aim to increase the employment opportunities of previously disadvantaged (in this case, “African”) people to such an extent that those who fall outside the category (i.e. white South Africans) not only lose their favoured positions but also come to be discriminated against with regard to hiring and professional advancement¹⁸. Majavu, a political activist known in the South African media as the “Black Commentator”, explains that the media propagates these ideas “by portraying

¹⁸ For further discussion of this concept, see comparative section on Affirmative Action in South Africa and the United States.

whites as being the new victims of racism meted out by blacks in the new South Africa" (2006:1).

During interviews, the concern that affirmative action can lead to "reverse racism" was often raised and many of the participants openly used this phrase to describe what they saw as preferential treatment according to race. Some, like Jan and the other men in this section, said that they had experienced it personally, and several felt strongly that this was a major problem with affirmative action policies. Indeed, a number of them likened affirmative action policies to apartheid policies in that both show "favouritism" toward a particular race. For example, James compared today's government to the National Party of the apartheid era, saying that "the same thing is happening today except that now blacks are doing this."

One of the consequences has been an increasing number of white males who are leaving South Africa to live in Europe and North America. A survey taken in 2004 found that as many as 33 per cent of employees in the IT sector (an area where the majority of workers are still white) were considering leaving South Africa within twelve months (Burrows 2004:7). Whether it is the fear of a lack of opportunities, or truly that fewer jobs to be found, is extremely problematic, not only economically but also in terms of what it means for negotiations of "race".

Consider the following case in point: Patrick, who was described at the beginning of this section, explained to me that he and his wife have a two-year plan, at the end of which they will be relocating to Canada. He felt that in South Africa, "the opportunities for advancement are very limited" and that he was "in a bit of a rut".

His wife, a well-educated scientist, was also having a difficult time finding employment, and they both felt they would have better opportunities overseas.

Patrick furthermore told me, “when we move, I’ll become a Canadian, not an ex-South African.” It seems that Patrick and his wife wish to start a new life overseas bringing along only their skills and experience as reflections of their lives thus far. While this is by no means the approach of all white South African workers, it nonetheless shows how policies aimed at integration are being interpreted by some people, namely, those who prefer to leave rather than deal with the changes. As Patrick said, “South Africa is in the process of unlearning, which is definitely a painful process.” Ultimately, working through that “pain” is more than some South Africans are willing to commit to.

For black workers finding their way the labour force, this message of rejection is explicit. Kenny, a black male and a risk manager in the insurance department of a local energy supply company, has experienced this attitude. He certainly felt it, and in response stated directly felt “people are racist,” and that “if people want to go, they should go.” Clearly this worker interprets the choice of some white South Africans to go overseas as racially motivated, illustrating how both economic *and* social spheres are affected by such choices. Affirmative action initiatives are often blamed for putting pressure on white workers to leave, thereby further embedding the idea in some people’s minds that there is a fundamental disparity between races that cannot be resolved. This again echoes apartheid-era notions that black and white people cannot work together successfully, with some people using the problematic

consequences of affirmative action policies as “justification” for racist beliefs that reach even beyond the workplace.¹⁹

“Just anyone” – The Problems with Finding Qualified Workers

Looking beyond the views of affirmative action as being potentially conducive to “reverse racism”, another troubling dimension arises with regard to these policies, and revolves around some people’s perceived link between race and job performance. On many occasions I have heard complaints from both black and white South Africans that affirmative action tends to push people into jobs they are not qualified or prepared for. Rupert is part of the disturbingly high percentage of white males working in the IT sector who are planning to move out of South Africa. Although currently employed as network engineer in a mid-sized company, Rupert repeatedly voiced his discontent at living in South Africa to me during interviews and the time we spent together outside of his work environment. Even though he has achieved a considerable degree of success in his career, he often expressed resentment toward black South Africans, feeling that affirmative action was allowing them to get jobs that they were not qualified for. On several occasions he complained about having to deal with black colleagues, saying that they were “incompetent” and slowed him down. Rupert claimed that these employees had only been hired to increase the presence of previously disadvantaged workers at his company in accordance with affirmative action legislation, and were not actually prepared for the jobs. In his words, “it [affirmative action] leads to just anyone coming in to work”.

¹⁹ This will be discussed in further detail in the section concerned with the impact of affirmative action policies in society.

This potentially raises a problem with the implementation of equity policies since the Employment Equity Act states:

Affirmative action measures are measures designed to ensure that *suitably qualified people* from designated groups have equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce of a designated employer. [Amended Employment Equity Act 2004:Chapter 3]

Why, then, does it appear that South Africa's black employees are sometimes seen as being unqualified for their jobs? To understand this phenomenon, the issue needs to be considered from social, historical and economic standpoints inclusively. Despite stipulations that affirmative action is applicable only to "suitably qualified people", some of the workers I interviewed nonetheless claimed that, like Rupert, they sometimes found themselves working with people from "designated groups" who did not have the proper skills and training for their jobs. This could be perceived as a flaw with how affirmative action policies are implemented. It occurs when companies attempt to comply with such policies but have to recruit from limited pools of qualified workers. According to Debbie Goodman, a South African recruiter, or "head-hunter",

While talented, qualified diversity [i.e. previously disadvantaged] professionals with outstanding experience and measurable successes are shining through in all areas of corporate South Africa, the reality exists that the demand for these gems exceeds the supply - particularly when the clock is ticking and charter deadlines must be met. [Goodman 2005:A1]

What often happens in such cases is that workers are fast-tracked based on the racial categories they fill, which may leave them in positions they are not suitably trained or educated for in order to make numbers add up on paper. Business owners are realizing that if they want to secure investments from both local and

foreign partners and avoid penalties from the government, they must comply with the regulations on employment equity. As Rupert put it, “You can’t have a company in South Africa if you’re not black empowered.” This often leaves businesses looking, sometimes desperately, to fill employment equity positions, which can result in the presence of workers in positions for which they are not yet ready.²⁰ Therefore although the legislation may make claims against it, affirmative action nevertheless becomes a quota system.

This phenomenon appears to have generated a great deal of criticism from some of the white workers I spoke with, in particular among the males who, like those mentioned earlier in this section, feel their job security is threatened. I observed on several occasions that among some of the white workers I spoke with, South Africa’s history of social inequality was repeatedly ignored or rejected as a factor in the current skills shortage, in favour of lingering beliefs that race is, in itself, a determinant of a worker’s potential. At times it was overwhelming to hear critiques of black workers abilities based on no other criterion than the colour of their skin. Indeed this was sometimes expressed explicitly, as when Rupert commented, “What else can you expect from the blacks?” in watching a group of construction workers beginning the long process of reinstalling a brick driveway that was done incorrectly the first time.

Kenny, the insurance risk manager mentioned earlier, spoke to me about his anger toward this sort of attitude. As he put it, “The [work] environment is racist. I get so frustrated, I hate going to work. If we [black people] don’t get an enabling

²⁰ Please see ethnography section relating to business owners trying to manoeuvre through this system.

environment, how are we supposed to get ahead?” Through his personal experiences he feels that some white South Africans are unwilling to recognize their black colleagues as equals and tend to blame any lack of qualification or poor performance on perceived biological inferiority rather than socio-historical inequality. This is a troubling and prevalent example of how public attitudes have not yet fully caught up to legislation regarding racial discrimination.

It is through wider contextualization, however, that we find the real explanations for the imbalanced numbers of skilled workers. It is important to remember that after decades of repression and exclusion from education and training²¹, it cannot be expected that all black South Africans can possess the same qualifications comparative to their white counterparts who have had extensive education and years of training in high level and skilled jobs. Kenny told me that “the Bantu Education Act created an environment of hatred” and made it very difficult for black people to get a good education. He said that he had been lucky enough to study at the University of the North (now the University of Limpopo), which “was established in 1959 under the provisions of the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 in order to exclude blacks from “white” universities through the creating of special tribal and racial colleges” (Limpopo University 2004). However, the amount of funding appropriated to such schools was far below that given to so-called “white universities” (Limpopo University 2004). Furthermore, since there were few post-secondary schools available for black people, access was also a problem.

²¹ During apartheid, the Bantu Education Act made it virtually impossible for black children to attend school (by teaching classes in English or Afrikaans only, by imposing high tuition fees, by constructing schools in remote and inaccessible locations, etc.)

With the dissolution of apartheid, “the formerly white universities were compelled by legislation to open their doors to black students” (Limpopo University 2004). As David, the former pharmaceutical executive, explained to me, “many kids who were not getting an education before are getting it now.” However, it will take time for these changes to become normalized in society, and with only a few years since the abolition of apartheid, South Africa is still struggling to achieve this balance.

“What I do, I do best” – Making Affirmative Action Work

Taking all this into account we can now consider the consequences arising from some workers’ claims that affirmative action leads to incompetence in the workforce. First considering just the effects on the economy, hiring unqualified workers inhibits growth and lowers profits, which comes to harm the country as a whole. As a case in point, Jabulani Ntshangase, who is part of the one per cent of black wine makers in the country, warned against hiring black workers who are not properly qualified for the positions. Specifically, he stated,

We should not just throw black people into the industry without the proper skills and education. After the elections in 1994 many black-owned companies went onto the Johannesburg stock exchange and many of them went out of business almost straight away. [Hamilton 2003:1]

Turning now to the social repercussions, one of the biggest concerns mentioned by several of the people I spoke with was that hiring workers based on race rather than merit inadvertently reinforces old stereotypes that black workers cannot compete on the same level as their white counterparts. Kenny, who spoke to me about the historical inequality in the education system, felt especially strongly

about this point. He told me that he felt it was “degrading to be employed by the colour of [his] skin” and wanted instead to be judged on his skills. Kenny said that he “may have the title, but no real power”.

This again indicates problems with the implementation of affirmative action policies. Currently, the Department of Trade and Industry is in the process of finalizing Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Codes of Good Practice, designed to give businesses some direction with regard to policy implementation. However, many companies are still struggling to successfully implement equity policies because until now there have not been practical guidelines for achieving these goals other than the numerical targets set forth by the Employment Equity Act of 1998.

A partial solution has been introduced through the growing number of “ratings agencies” set up to evaluate companies in order to determine whether they are meeting policy goals and deadlines. Through a process of inspections, interviews, and analysis of documentation, the ratings analyst can get a fairly thorough view of whether affirmative action targets are being incorporated and met in a given company²². However, these agencies are still not officially accredited by the government and have “no legal backing”, as Jamie, a young, white male working at one such ratings agency, informed me. Furthermore, ratings agencies are limited on account of their inability to provide guidelines for policy implementation. Jamie said that although the evaluations he carries out “are not just a report card”, they can ultimately only verify the accuracy of company reports, and do not provide

²² Appendix B is a sample scorecard from one such agency as a point of reference for some of the elements that factor into such an assessment.

suggestions for facilitating the integration process. In other words, “a rating agency, like an auditor, is there to ensure that what you claim is the truth; they are not there to advise” (Janisch 2006:1).

Nonetheless, they are increasing in popularity among local businesses that are realizing that a commitment to employment equity is necessary for securing deals with other companies. According to a news article in a local publication, “in spite of the unofficial status of agencies, many companies are still insisting on some sort of a rating certificate before they will enter into a business relationship” (Janisch 2006:1)²³.

In discussing his role in the agency and the type of work he does, Jamie explained that while equity policies are a positive step in the right direction, both the government and individual companies need to follow through on them by contracting organizations to help company owners with the transition toward an equitable workplace. This means providing clearer guidelines and implementing checks along the way to ensure employees are comfortable with the process.

In the meanwhile, there are some instances of companies actively seeking to implement equity policies effectively. For example, Cindy, who was introduced in the methodology chapter, is a young, white female whose job in the software development organization she works for is to act as a Skills Development Facilitator to support such training initiatives. She said that her central role is “to give black people access to skills” so that they can perform their jobs well and with confidence. She advocated greater investment in training current and potential employees rather than just pushing them into jobs based on racial categories. Even Patrick, the young

²³ This issue will be dealt with further in the following section on South African business owners.

man planning to leave South Africa in search of better opportunities, also believed that “education and upskilling [sic] are not given the power they need” and wished to see more development in these areas to alleviate tension in the workforce.

Inadequate planning on the part of the government may be partly to blame as it has committed a great deal of resources towards job creation and perhaps not enough in education and skills training. This highlights the post-apartheid government’s push for expedient amelioration of past injustices. Sifiso, the young insurance worker quoted at the beginning of this chapter, criticized these rushed tactics, stating that “the government is failing to take a long-term approach; there is too much focus on instant gratification.”

Alternative approaches could ensure that more people like Cindy work within companies to assist with the integration of black workers. Jacqui Young, a recruitment company CEO, further suggests “accelerated development programmes...coupled with support and mentorship systems” to ensure sufficient numbers of black workers receive proper qualifications and training (Clarkson and Jovanovic 2004:14).

Most of the people I spoke with wished to see such initiatives become more widespread, and indeed there is evidence to suggest that such measures can be very effective at integrating black workers into the labour force. For example, Sifiso strongly advocated greater support for policy implementation because he had personally benefited from such programs. He spoke to me about the extensive training he received at the company he works for, a large organization with a high degree of public accountability that adopted special measures to deal with the

recruitment of black workers. He believes that such programs have helped him attain his current level of success at his job. When I asked him how he felt about his position in the company, he told me simply, “what I do, I do best. I never settle for second.” Thus Sfiso stands as a positive example of how affirmative action policies can succeed when combined with proper support and training.

Beyond increasing “on the job” learning initiatives, time will be an important factor in determining the potential success of affirmative action policies. Many people are still attempting to find their footing in the “new South Africa”, and moving on from past injustice will take some time. After such a long period of psychological and institutional repression, some black people still doubt their own abilities to fit into a ‘white world’²⁴, and beyond all the equal opportunities now legally granted to them, this is going to take years to overcome. As Sfiso put it, “new generations will be of great help.” Employment equity policies could therefore stand to play an important role in helping the current and new working populations if properly implemented to reflect long-term goals and provide solid frameworks through which they can be achieved.

²⁴ As early as the 1960s, the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa was fighting against this sort of “colonization of the mind” that resulted from the inability of black people to see themselves as anything but inferior on account of years of repression and subjugation.

Part II – South Africa’s Business Owners

Special Circumstances Surrounding Small Businesses – Introduction

Throughout the course of my fieldwork I have spoken both formally and informally to many people about what “race” means to them. During that time I did not encounter even one person who denied that racial inequalities abound in South Africa, and indeed every person I spoke with described varying levels of integration they thought should be achieved in the nation in order to redress such imbalances. This all appears to indicate that there are South Africans who are ready and willing to bring about changes to improve the quality of life for all people.

Unfortunately, the story is not nearly as simple or as positive as would appear on the surface. The implementation of employment equity legislation in the workforce may appear to be a fairly straightforward matter: regulations are written with which company owners must comply. However, in speaking with members of South Africa’s workforce, it became evident that there are many complex ways that people manoeuvre through the system that do not necessarily involve following the rules *per se*. Therefore although the creation of policies may be a fairly straightforward process, the hesitation or avoidance of business owners to implement them potentially shows ideological barriers to racial integration.

This can be particularly well illustrated by looking at small business owners, who face a different set of policies and expectations with regard to affirmative action than their large-scale counterparts. Specifically, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) stipulates that a “‘designated employer’ [i.e. one who must implement affirmative action] means a person who employs 50 or more employees” (South African

Department of Labour 1998:Chapter 1). Does this mean that small business owners are exempt from the policies? Regarding most principles of the policy, the answer is yes, but as I came to see, small business owners have little hope of surviving in the corporate world if they do not make some effort to embrace affirmative action in their companies, and indeed some insist on adopting the policies even though they are not necessarily required to do so by law.

The reasons for this may be indicative of how perspectives on racial integration are changing in the country. Some small-scale entrepreneurs who are personally committed to social accountability in their business practice are actively inviting affirmative action ratings agencies to evaluate them. In achieving a passing score, they are demonstrating their ability to contribute to fair business in South Africa. In turn, this may help them secure contracts and cooperation from other like-minded businesses that insist on knowing a company's rating before doing business with it.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, this trend reveals that companies are increasingly demanding that the businesses they deal with are engaged in equitable business practice. Although some do not necessarily support such moves toward racial integration, there are nonetheless examples of small business owners in South Africa who are making a personal choice to engage with affirmative action by incorporating its practice into their business plans.

I therefore spent some time analyzing the interviews of small business owners specifically for the purpose of considering what racial (in)equality and integration mean to them, both in ideology and in practice. In large companies,

policy stipulates that yearly reports must be filed with the Department of Trade and Industry, and neglect of affirmative action procedures results in direct legal repercussions. Therefore, unless they are willing to face heavy fines and penalties, there is little choice among large companies but to comply.

Among small businesses, however, the choices owners make with regard to employment equity may potentially reveal a shift in attitudes about race, since lack of legal obligation with regard to affirmative action leaves more room for ambiguity, and therefore for personal interpretation. We can then ask, what are some of the strategies adopted by small business owners in navigating affirmative action policies, and how do these reflect on constructions of meaning regarding “race” in South Africa?

“That’s gold in this country” – The Pressure to “Hire Black” in Small Business

Early in my interviews, I had the opportunity to sit down with Amy, John and Gerald, three young, white entrepreneurs (all under the age of 26 at the time) who had started their own company to provide Internet service to the public. Five years ago they decided to come together in this endeavour and are now achieving a moderate level of success in the South African economy. As they told me, all of them had fairly “privileged” childhoods, attending private schools where they were among the early batch of South African students exposed to inter-racial classroom settings. They therefore had ample opportunity to “mingle”, study with and generally gain exposure to young people from all sorts of backgrounds.

Before starting up their business, Amy had completed a university degree in psychology, John had done technical work at a local television station, and Gerald had started another company but had sold out before starting this company with his two friends. According to them, only a few years earlier when apartheid was ending, South Africa did not have Internet access, and even access to television stations was severely limited. They claim that since that time the government has been making large investments in social development, education and job creation, which means that the demand for Internet connections is growing rapidly. As Gerald put it, “now everyone needs access, and that’s the sole reason we exist.”

At the time we spoke, they headed a staff of ten permanent and three contract workers, all of whom were white except for two Indian²⁵ workers. After giving these figures and without any prompting on my part, Amy informed me that “being white is not a priority or criteria”, but rather that they “want someone who ‘fits in’”. As John told me, “attitude is more important than qualifications”, and Amy reasserted that they would hire black people if they “fit in”. In fact, they generally agreed that, all things being equal, they would hire a black person over a white person because, as John said, “that’s gold in this country”.

Feeling that we were touching on something important, I asked the team to elaborate. They expressed to me that they were feeling a great deal of pressure from outside the company to “hire black”. This was experienced, according to their examples, through changes in equity policies, demands from other businesses to become “black empowered”, and increasing numbers of black applicants seeking out

²⁵ The term “Indian” is used in South Africa both in everyday speech and in Employment Equity legislation. It refers to South Africa’s large minority of East Indian descent. This group is included in the designated groups covered by Affirmative Action, under the “black” category.

fair representation in an integrative work environment. The three owners agreed that while they had no problems with employing black people, they felt resentful at not being given the freedom to come to that decision on their own. At this point Gerald pitched in and said “although apartheid was never our choice, we are bearing the brunt of that government”.

Clearly, the young people of this new generation have a lot to deal with. Though they are lucky to be experiencing a “new South Africa” where everyone is legally granted equal rights, they seem to feel that political correctness has replaced personal choice. This means that regardless of their potential desire for racial integration, they nonetheless sense that government pressure is infringing on their abilities to run the business as they see fit since they sometimes feel forced to hire based on colour instead of on merit alone.

A particular aspect that they found troubling were the new BEE guidelines that were starting to be formed when we spoke, which stated that “qualifying small enterprises” would be required to have 25 per cent black ownership (The Department of Trade and Industry 2007:3). Although at the time of the interview, these were not yet officially legislated²⁶ (John described the process as being “in limbo”), small business owners such as Amy, John and Gerald knew that they would eventually come to be standard practice. For such a small company, they said this would mean bringing in “a stranger” to control one-quarter of what they had worked so hard to build. Finding a suitable partner to join the team was a decision that they took seriously; at the time we spoke, they had not yet found a suitable candidate and were not actively seeking one. It appeared as though they would prefer to wait for

²⁶ The Broad Based Black Empowerment Codes of Good Practice were officially implemented in February 2007.

the legislation to become official before making any changes in their company structure, indicating an unwillingness to be proactive about the process.

Furthermore, they also brought up the increasing tendency of many local and multinational companies to demand some form of employment equity from the companies they invest in even if the government does not strictly regulate it. As such, they acknowledged that for many companies, not following the general procedures of affirmative action means little opportunity for growth, as clients demand certain levels of equity from the companies they do business with. However, they did not feel this impacted them significantly as the need for the service they provided was high enough to compensate for potential loss resulting from this.

Considering their narratives, an interesting dilemma emerges. On one hand these are people who explicitly expressed that they agree with integration, although they nonetheless believe that “the goal has been set badly”, as Amy put it. Even while their identity may be shaped by modern beliefs in racial integration, they nonetheless have come to feel resentment at what they perceive as punishment for the mistakes of their forebears. By not being given the freedom and responsibility to make certain decisions on their own, their negotiations of race come to be strongly affected by external, prescriptive forces. On the other hand, it is next to impossible to incorporate any kind of “goodwill clause” into affirmative action policies because there is really very little it could be concretely based on. Furthermore, there is evidence to indicate that not all South Africans would be willing to act in good faith were such an option available to them.

Therefore, this team was choosing to maintain their current operations as they were, and wait for new policies that would explicitly dictate further steps they would need to take. Regardless of (and even contrary to) their claim to believe in racial integration, they were nonetheless unwilling to incorporate it into their business plan at that time. This incongruence between what they say and how they choose to act on it may imply a rejection of the changes taking place in the workforce through affirmative action policies.

“I’ve earned the right to be unethical” – Responses to “Fronting”

“Fronting” is an example of what happens when company owners decide to take matters (meaning legislation) into their own hands and find “alternative” routes to employment equity. It is a method wherein a company operated by a white company owner will buy out a company employing mostly black workers and maintain only the loosest affiliation with it for purposes of meeting affirmative action targets as spelled out in the legislation. In such instances (which I am told occur quite frequently in South Africa), small businesses, or *front companies*, are sold out believing they can benefit through their association with more prestigious conglomerates, but in reality are only used as “quota fillers”.

Clearly such a practice poses a lot of problems, not least of which is the fact that it encourages corruption in business. It furthermore sends South Africans a negative message about affirmative action, namely, that it is an impractical system concerned primarily with numbers and reflects poorly on people’s potential for integration in the workforce.

Out of all the people I spoke with during the course of my interviews, there was only one who did not take an overt stance against fronting, so I will discuss this anomaly first. The person in question was Elaine, a white woman who ran a small marketing company that she had founded herself in the early 1990s. Even though this was a sensitive subject, her honesty on the matter was greatly appreciated, particularly since she was willing to admit to considering a practice that everyone was quick to condemn but that nonetheless happens on a regular basis.

As she explained to me, Elaine started the company herself and has only thirteen employees. Of these, two are Indian (one of which is in management), four are black (two of which are in management) and the remaining seven employees are white. While she does not “officially” fall under the affirmative action legislation because she employs fewer than fifty workers, she, like the others, said that she would have very little luck running the company if she did not demonstrate that it abided by the principles of black economic empowerment (BEE). This is again due to the increasing demands of companies and stakeholders who refuse to deal with businesses that are not black empowered. However, she stated that when she founded the company, it had been her own choice to hire people of all colours. She was personally committed to incorporating diversity in the workforce, and had been engaged in this practice since before it came to be legislated in any way.

However, because of recent changes to legislation, she will also have to reach the set quota of 25 per cent “black ownership” in her company, which, considering its size, would mean a complete overhaul of company structure and a loss of power on her part. One way she has chosen to cope with this was to give

thirty per cent of her company to her staff in the form of an employee share trust²⁷.

In choosing this course of action, Elaine reasoned that it would give the employees extra motivation to stay with the company and to contribute to its success, thereby reducing turnover and increasing productivity. This was her way of keeping control over her company while meeting racial quotas as required by the regulations.

The situation is complicated, however, because there are several positions that she has been struggling for over two years to fill with “people of colour” (her words), which she has not been able to do – these are in the fields of graphic design and production management. According to her, these are areas that black people have not particularly been drawn toward (as evidenced by the lack of qualified workers in these fields) and in which they are therefore very much in demand. The salaries she would have to pay to afford such workers would be too great for a company of such small size²⁸.

As Elaine said, a front company might be an answer to her problem and it is an option she admits to having considered. She feels that because she has complied with the principles of affirmative action years before formal policy was implemented, it “gives [her] the right to do something unethical”. Elaine said she is “not in favour of fronting”, but can see why businesses owners, particularly of small companies, choose to go this route. This hints at the ability of affirmative action policies to shape how meanings of “race” are negotiated among some of South Africa’s small business owners through the strategies they employ to deal with them.

²⁷ The recipients of this trust were all employees categorized as belonging to “designated groups” according to the Employment Equity Act.

²⁸ Here she indicated that it is for this reason black people tend to get paid more than their white counterparts for certain positions.

What is revealed once again is that affirmative action policies have the tendency to create changes that some business owners, particularly those running small companies, are either not ready to accept (as with the three Internet service providers who were not yet willing to change their business structure) or are difficult to incorporate (as with Elaine who could not find black employees to fill certain positions). This is a problematic issue that is at least being more directly addressed in the new BEE codes that are currently emerging than in previous legislation. Whether they are effective remains to be seen over time, but for now the propensity of people to negotiate these policies using their own, personal tactics remains unchanged.

“Rent-a-darkie” – How Fronting Plays on the Maintenance of Racist Stereotypes

Looking at the rest of the people I spoke with who, as mentioned, were quicker to condemn fronting outright, there were some interesting discussions of this issue. The one thing that stood out to me is that blame was placed on both the white company owners who are buying out the smaller companies as well as the black company owners who are going along with this. Some would say that fronting tends to give people the idea that affirmative action does not work and as such sends the signal that underhanded means need to be used to circumvent the policies. In fact, I have heard some white people using the existence of front companies as “justification” for their racist stereotypes; specifically, they have commented that black people are incapable of reaching the same levels in business as white people and so they “sell out” in order to stay afloat economically. In effect

fronting ensures that white business owners do not have to take responsibility for integration because they find it easier instead to “masquerade” behind companies operated by black workers instead of legitimately employing the workers and investing in education and training in order to achieve equity in their businesses.

Considering this from another perspective, some people I spoke with explained that black people are “letting themselves be used”, as Kenny described, by giving up their independence to white company owners. The phrase “rent-a-darkie” is evidence of this, and was introduced to me by Sfiso, the young black worker discussed in the previous section. He explained that “for businesses to get ahead, they need a dark face”. When shortcuts are taken and fronting occurs, black workers are exploited and come to take on secondary roles to white business owners who actually hold all the power, and in the process of doing so may be seen to be regressing to subordinate roles not unlike during the time of apartheid.

This echoes concepts raised through Black Consciousness, which, as early as the 1960s, was fighting against “mental colonization” that, through years of repression, caused black people to consider themselves inferior to white. In this particular context, if black people allow white business owners to take over their companies, they are propagating the notion that black people are incapable of working by the same standards as white, and thereby contribute to their own subjugation. This does not bode well for the “collective consciousness” of black South Africans since it continues to leave them at a level below that of the white sector even though they now have the opportunities, and are legally entitled to, the same rights and privileges as everybody else. As Steve Biko, the founder of the

Black Consciousness movement, said, “at the heart of true integration is the provision for each man, each group to rise and attain the envisioned self” (1978:21). Clearly if that “self” is being bought out and controlled by white elites, integration cannot take place on any meaningful level.

“Slip through the cracks” – Asking Questions of Affirmative Action

Returning once again to the three young entrepreneurs I began with, I wanted to know if they felt there was any way that affirmative action policies could be reworked to more accurately reflect the needs of small business owners. They replied that the government should be offering more incentives and benefits to small business owners. If this could happen, John explained, then they would add new employees instead of feeling that they had to replace old ones. In my mind I asked myself whether such financial incentives could ease racial tensions, but the answer to that question is not immediately available. In one regard it would mean exploitation of racial policies for monetary profit, but at the same time it could also smooth the way for integration on a *practical* level (namely, through exposure to workplace diversity), which may in turn help people move past racist assumptions on an *ideological* level.

All of this can be speculated on at great length. What remains is that the ways that company owners “slip through the cracks” of the regulations may indicate that they are rejecting the system that is designed to bring about equality. This is not merely a matter for the corporate auditors – it speaks to the real possibility that some South Africans either are not ready to embrace racial equality, or that they do

not see affirmative action as a viable means to do so. The challenge for policy-makers that arises from the ethnographic material is to consider how they can placate South Africa's small business owners and encourage their growth while at the same time making sure that black South Africans are not excluded or marginalized from this process.

Part III – Beyond the Workplace

Affirmative action carries its own particular set of implications for the economic, social and racial restructuring of the labour market. Changes brought about through recent legislative acts are radically altering the face of South Africa's businesses as programs such as affirmative action attempt to rectify years of white dominance in the workforce. One thing that became clear in speaking with participants for this study, however, is that the effects of affirmative action policies do not stop at the end of the day when workers leave their jobs. They extend beyond the assembly line, the cubicle and the corner office, and lie within the community at large.

One of the ways this is commonly expressed is through the blame that some people place on affirmative action policies for their dissatisfaction with everyday problems outside the workplace. It seems that everything from mundane irritations such as long queues at the supermarket to serious concerns such as violent crime are being addressed through the relatively "safe" form of blaming the policies of black economic empowerment (BEE).

"Now they queue with us" – Changes to Quality of Service

Since 1994, there has been a great deal of pressure put on the state to equalize access to goods and services among all South Africans. Over the six months that I lived in Johannesburg, I spoke with both service providers and service receivers/consumers²⁹. I discovered greatly varying opinions on how effectively

²⁹ During interviews, the term *services* was used broadly to include both private and government-subsidized provision of goods and services.

companies are operating in terms of their ability to satisfy customer needs in light of the increasing incorporation of black workers. In the context of recent affirmative action legislation, which has necessitated business restructuring based on racial quotas, there is a great deal of discussion regarding the ability of South African service workers to maintain (and possibly improve) service standards in South Africa.

What is interesting is that there seems to be no unified response to the question of how the quality of services has changed since 1994 (and the legislative eradication of colour bars that ensued). People's opinions, regardless of their backgrounds, tend to range from experiencing lowered standards to noticing improved provision of services. For example, James is a white South African who was mentioned previously. He told me that he felt services have gone down due to the "competency situation", and when asked to elaborate indicated that he felt the higher numbers of black people in the workforce today are not capable of doing their jobs³⁰. He somewhat nostalgically asked the question, "what happened to all the white faces?", presumably those that once monopolized the service field.

Conversely, people were also able to give specific examples of how services had improved, such as Elaine, the small business owner mentioned earlier who pointed out that "now everything is online", and Indira, a third-generation Indian woman who worked as an insurance claims clerk, who observed that "now there is protection for domestic workers", a class of workers that has historically been greatly mistreated.

³⁰ This theme was considered in detail in the ethnographic section dealing with workers.

The fact that there is no general consensus to this question is indicative of an underlying tension and contesting interpretations of the situation. This was when the ability to observe and participate in informal discussions became extremely valuable. Serber experienced a similar phenomenon in the bureaucracy within which he was carrying out research, and states that “as my research progressed, I became increasingly aware of the importance of informal procedures in routine regulatory practices as well as in policy formation and administrative decision making” (1981:73).

Over time, I came to see that everyday attitudes expressed outside the confines of the work environment also play an important role in understanding how social processes are being shaped. Some of the examples mentioned throughout the ethnographic sections attest to this, as the time I spent with people like Rebecca and her parents, Rupert and Sfiso proved to be very enriching to that end. From these and many other observations, it appears that there is much more to the grumbling overheard in places such as crowded waiting rooms and grocery isles than meets the eye. It is in just such settings, beyond the formalized atmosphere of the ethnographic interview, where people became quite animated about their roles as consumers.

One particular incident illustrates this point: upon entering the aforementioned driver's licence bureau with my companion (a white male), I noticed several rows of people waiting to speak with the sole agent (a black female) who appeared to be working at the window. A middle-aged white woman commented to me, “I haven't moved in two hours, these queues are ridiculous” when I asked if she had been

waiting long. Looking at the rest of the faces waiting their turn at the counter, I couldn't help but notice that it was mostly black people who filled the room. Indeed this is not surprising as approximately three-quarters of South Africa's citizens are defined as "black" (or "African" under affirmative action policies). At one point a white man walked in, looked at the crowd, and immediately walked over to another counter where he was informed by a bored-looking black worker that the services he needed were conducted at the other, busier counter. He briefly attempted to persuade the employee of the urgency of the situation, and upon receiving no sympathy marched out of the room angrily slamming the door behind him.

Besides this small outburst, people generally continued to wait quietly for their turn, though it was clear by their expressions that they were not particularly happy to be stuck there. After a one-hour wait and a strained discussion with the black female employee (whose heavy accent makes her English somewhat difficult to understand and results in the wrong forms being filled out), my companion eventually had his case sorted out. Upon exiting, he flippantly remarked to me, "that's BEE [black economic empowerment] for you" after a tirade of dissatisfaction at the services provided.

This is not an isolated incident. Consider Figure 4, which is a cartoon that was being circulated by e-mail when I first began conducting interviews for this study in South Africa:

Figure 4: South African Political Cartoon



What stands out is that all of the characters in the cartoon are portrayed as being “white”. Frustrated with long lines, communication problems and poor quality, I overheard phrases such as “that’s BEE for you” or “this is affirmative action at its finest” repeatedly leave the mouths of some white South Africans as they went about their day, their sarcasm underlining their tension. In reacting to everything from traffic delays to over-chlorinated pools, I heard these people frequently state that black economic empowerment is responsible for many of the problems faced by all South Africans as a whole. On several occasions I was informed by some of these people that eventually I, too, would “become a racist just like them” after I had spent some time there. Clearly for some white South Africans, such attitudes were normalized to the point of being acceptable within their social groups.

As a new ethnographer, complete with the ideals that came with my “western” education, manoeuvring through these attitudes was trying to say the least, but

nonetheless also served to inspire me to understand the processes at work. I found myself questioning if, by choosing to blame the policy instead of the people, this could be an indicator of a muted form of racist expression, or “new racism”, as described in the South Africa/United States comparison?

In order to answer this question it is important to consider how it is possible for some individuals to express negative outlooks about service quality on one hand, and for others to insist that services have greatly improved. The latter observation has often been voiced particularly during formal interviews, thereby casting doubt on any previous conclusions with regard to people’s overall dissatisfaction. It was often the case during such interviews, when people had more time for deeper speculation, that they made responses such as “I don’t believe they [services] have declined” and “I’ve seen great improvements from when I was a child” when presented with the question of service quality.

It became evident that there is not a unified view on the state of services over the last ten years. It was not until the interview with Jamie, who works at the private ratings firm, that an explanation for these discrepancies began to take form. When I asked him whether he thought services had improved or declined since 1994, the expected confirmation or negation was not given. Instead, the following explanation was given:

“First of all, you have to consider that in South Africa there are about 12 million white people and well over 40 million black people. [*At this point he rose and began drawing a diagram on a presentation easel.*] When you consider before ’94... this small [indicating *white*] percentage had access to the majority of services. Things like health care, education and better infrastructure were almost exclusively the domains of the white minority and black people were... denied pretty much all access. Now comes 1994 and an end to apartheid and all of a sudden black people are told they have equal

rights to government services. They're also going into the areas where previously only white people had been, and now you see them in the malls, the restaurants, sharing a queue with you at the market. Suddenly you have these resources that were used by the minority which now have to be spread out over the entire population of South Africa. So that small little portion of the population which had enjoyed... pretty much everything up till that point who now has to share. And so you see some of them may complain that their services have dropped, and they are very dramatic about this because they are not used to having to play fair and share their toys and really the problem is not nearly as extreme as they make it out to be. On the other hand you now have a majority of the population who once had access to nothing, now having things like basic health care and education, or at least the right to access them if they wish. So maybe now we wait a little longer, but think of the benefits that are now being enjoyed across the population as a whole."

From this explanation the differences in opinion start to become understandable. Once apartheid was abolished, many boundaries were crossed and black South Africans were told they could have equal access to all public services. This meant that, in theory, the resources once controlled exclusively by the white minority would be distributed more widely to include *all* South Africans.³¹ It is not unreasonable to say, then, that while there may be a strain to provide the same level of service to all people, the vast majority who had had virtually nothing prior to 1994 saw their quality of life greatly improved. As Amy, the white South African business owner mentioned earlier, said to me, "there are hundreds of people who had never seen a light bulb prior to 1994, therefore electrical services, as much as we complain about them, have greatly improved for them."

When put in these terms, it is easy to see that the question of service quality is really about one's position. There is no question that the government has been working to improve living standards in South Africa, going so far as to provide free

³¹ Though ideological and racial barricades still prevent service provision from being truly racially egalitarian, there is nonetheless evidence that more black people are in fact getting increased access to services and resources. See Table 1 for example.

electricity in certain areas, building homes, and providing better health care (particularly for HIV/AIDS patients). The infrastructure has shown steady development since the days of apartheid and access to resources is now available to the majority of the population. Statistics support this claim, as evidenced in the South African Human Development Index (Stats SA 1996:11). Consider the following:

Figure 5: South African Adult Literacy Rates by Population Group, 1980 and 1996

Population Group	Adult Literacy Rate (%) 1980	Adult Literacy Rate (%) 1996
Africans	66.03	83.05
Whites	98.90	99.32

While still not entirely balanced, this example at least shows the progress that has been made by the black population since the days of apartheid. Therefore, South Africans who complain that services have declined are simply dealing with the reality of living in a country where all people are legally considered to be equal. As one black woman put it, “now they [white South Africans] queue with us”.

“Serves him right” – Reflections on Crime in South Africa

While the issue of crime in South Africa has surfaced previously throughout this thesis, it is nonetheless a relevant point to return to on account of its repeated mention among many of the people I spoke with. For example, Jan and Corienne said that although they enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, they have both been victims of crime in the past. Their home had been robbed numerous times despite the

complex security systems they use, and on one occasion the couple, as well as Corienne's elderly mother, were followed from a shopping centre by four (black) men who had attacked them in their driveway upon their return home, stealing their belongings and injuring the older woman in order to acquire her jewellery. In a separate incident, their daughter Rebecca had been involved in an armed hold-up in a popular jazz club and restaurant, having escaped uninjured although her valuables had been stolen. She said that this was "part of living in S.A." and claimed that "all South Africans" have at some point either experienced or been affected by crime.

Despite these experiences, Rebecca and her parents told me that they love living in South Africa. Corienne admitted that they enjoyed a "nice" standard of living and although she wished that the levels of crime were lower, she saw this as a "trade-off" for the relative luxury in which they lived. They, like many South Africans I spoke with, have grown accustomed to living in a society with increased levels of crime. As Corienne said, "life goes on".

While people certainly do come to cope with the threat of crime in various ways, it is nonetheless a distressing aspect marring the quality of life of all South Africans. In the words of one sociologist doing research on crime and policing in South Africa,

Whatever the scale of political violence before the transition, criminal violence is identified as a dominant feature of the post-apartheid landscape. Violent crime is now clearly associated with South Africa. [Shaw 2002:xii]

Although the many reasons contributing to South Africa's elevated crime levels are beyond the scope of this thesis, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge how people are responding to them and some of the racial implications

they carry beyond the workforce. Consider the following narrative, which occurred in a social setting completely removed from the formality of interviews. It is based on an afternoon spent having coffee with my friend Ana and her friends Daniel and Alex in an elegant, tree-lined neighbourhood in Johannesburg. At the time it took place, the nature of my research was not being discussed, and the participants were essentially discussing a topic that they personally found interesting. I was therefore able to observe this exchange and later make notes on it.

I had met Ana on previous trips to South Africa and we would often spend time together, going shopping, to the gym, to the movies, watching television or just sitting and chatting. On this afternoon we were spending time with Daniel in the apartment that he shared with his brother Alex. Their father, Martin, bought, renovated and resold property for a fairly prosperous living, and had constructed this extension of the house for the two young men to share.

During the second round of coffee, Daniel's brother Alex showed up and joined us. He had not been with us long when Alex mentioned that their father had shot a suspected robber in their yard the previous week. Ana and I were both taken aback with how casually he brought this up, as though he were discussing a recent trip to the cinema rather than a backyard shoot-out. Ana immediately asked to know what had happened, and I listened to the brothers recount the story to us while she prompted them for details at various intervals.

The previous week, Daniel had stayed up late at home watching television. Alex was on holiday at the Cape during that time. At about half past one in the morning, Daniel went downstairs to get something to eat from the kitchen. He heard

a commotion coming from the house next door and saw somebody running in the dark along the fence. According to him, his first thought at the time was that if an intruder was going to come into the home, he did not want to be caught halfway through a snack with his mouth full. I found this response curious, and considered whether his reaction was an example of the extent to which Jo'burgers have become desensitized to the violence happening in the city around them (and, in this case, in their own backyard), or if it was just a strange reaction to the fear.

In continuing the story, Daniel described the sound of dogs barking frantically next door, and said that shortly afterward the woman who lived there could be heard screaming. By this time Martin had come down to the kitchen to see what was happening. Seeing what appeared to be intruders trying to break into the neighbour's home, he ran upstairs to the balcony that overlooks the yard. What Daniel did not know at the time was that his father had his gun with him. He said that in the next minute or so he heard shots fired and did not know where they were coming from until Martin came back down and said that he had shot the intruder when he hopped over the fence into their yard in an attempt to make a getaway.

Afterward, when the police were questioning the young men's father, Daniel told us how the police asked what he called "really obvious leading questions" while filling out the incident report. Apparently, the officer who was taking notes asked things such as, "You were firing a warning shot when the intruder was running by, is that right? And it happened to hit him?" and "Didn't you get your gun because you saw the intruder carrying a weapon?"

Ana appeared to be disturbed by this information though not particularly surprised. Alex commented dryly that in “these types of incidences”, police are eager to dispose of the matter quickly with minimal complications since, as the brothers said, this sort of thing happened so frequently that they “could not be bothered to take it too seriously”. For Daniel and Alex, it was the third time an intruder had jumped that same fence into their backyard in the two years they had been living on that property.

As an outsider accustomed to a considerable sense of security from local authorities, it was quite unnerving for me to hear how the Johannesburg officers apparently handled this incident according to Alex and Daniel’s account. What struck me most, however, was that while the brothers were recounting the story, at no point did anyone mention the “race” of either the suspect or the investigating officer, and when they had finished telling it I made a point of asking, in the interest of getting the facts but also to see the response. The question was quickly glossed over and the attitudes of the discussants (i.e. smirks and a muttered response) indicated that this should be self-evident, though I was humoured as a “naïve outsider” for asking what they saw as an obvious questions. In the end, it turned out that the intruder had been black and the officer had been white. Martin was also a white male.

Since nobody seemed particularly concerned about the fate of the victim, I wanted to know more about what had transpired. It turned out, in fact, that the suspect had been unarmed and had not even succeeded in breaking into the neighbour’s home since the dogs had made such a commotion. During the fifteen to

twenty minutes Daniel said it took the ambulance to arrive, the neighbours had stood around waiting. By the time they arrived, the wounded man (who had been shot in the stomach) had bled out in the yard and died.

Nobody at this point in the conversation bothered to speculate whether the man could have been saved through first aid or artificial resuscitation, even though several people in the neighbourhood had come out to see what was happening and nobody made an effort to go near the injured man. A couple of neighbours did come up to congratulate Martin on “catching” the intruder.

In finishing the story, Daniel imitated a comment made by one of the neighbours while waiting for the emergency response team. According to him, the bystander had spoken loudly so the neighbours could overhear, essentially stating words to the effect of, “That’s what they get if they want to be criminals instead of working for a living like the rest of us. It serves him right.” It was troubling to think that these might have been the last words heard by the injured man before he died in the yard.

In addition, it revealed an important assumption made by the observer in this scenario, which is that inability to earn a living could lead to elevated levels of crime. According to Shaw, “a strong link has of course been demonstrated to exist between poverty and crime; thus a reduction of poverty appears to lead to a reduction of, for example, street crimes associated with poverty” (2002:151).

However, an added dimension arises among statistics that reveal that prison populations are not equally distributed in terms of race. Of the nearly 160 000 prisoners currently incarcerated in South African jails, 2 765 are white whereas 128

703, the clear majority, are black (South African Department of Correctional Services 2007:1).

These numbers potentially indicate that, on average, it is unemployed, black South Africans who are often being imprisoned. Tellingly, this is the target population of black economic empowerment codes, which are seeking to give black South Africans access to employment. Using these statistic, therefore, it may be possible to project that by decreasing unemployment rates, especially among the black population where it is highest, this can lead to reducing poverty rates and thereby lower the instances of poverty-related crimes. These are lofty projections but nonetheless indicate that equity policies may stand to have an important role not only in increasing the representation of black workers in the labour force, but also potentially ameliorating crime levels in turn. The ability of affirmative action policies to achieve these goals in any significant measure is an optimistic challenge that will only be determined over an extended period of time and analysis.

In the meanwhile, the stereotype so naturally assumed by my companions, namely, that a black person would be automatically responsible for the crime being described, continues to remain prevalent among many of the people I spoke with, even among black South Africans. Such assumptions can in turn work negatively against black workers seeking to find employment and not being trusted. This was clearly evidenced by one white woman I spoke with who fired a number of black “maids” during the course of my stay in South Africa, being convinced that each one was stealing from her. Often times, the nail polish or other displaced item would

resurface once the domestic worker had been unceremoniously relieved of her duties.

From these types of accounts, it becomes clear to see that “as in other post-transitional societies faced with the challenge of building confidence in the new order, crime in South Africa has political consequences” (Shaw 2002:xiii). As such, the connection between affirmative action policies and crime levels is an area of study that may be worthy of further consideration.

Chapter 6: A Consideration of Affirmative Action Policies as Contrasted Between South Africa and the United States

The primary goal of this chapter is to present an ethnographically-contextualized and theoretically-substantiated comparison of the impacts of affirmative action policies in South Africa and the United States of America. This cross-cultural consideration reveals that although similar equity programs have been implemented in both countries, the environments being discussed contrast significantly in some important respects. Therefore, the effects resulting from the politicization of “race” through affirmative action programs have sometimes been experienced in different ways. At the same time, some of the popular discourse generated around affirmative action in both countries tends to carry similar critiques. These themes will be considered in depth throughout this section.

Affirmative Action in America

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of how race and racism have shaped the socio-political landscape of the United States.

Over five hundred years ago, the booming slave trade forcefully brought workers to America from all parts of the world, particularly Africa and the Caribbean. This was justified by the Catholic Church in Spain and Portugal, which gave its support for the mass importation of slaves to America to build the Iberian colonies. According to Davidson,

These captives, it was therefore soon being said, were fitted for enslavement because they lacked the capacities to know and use freedom: they belonged in truth to an inferior sort of humanity; in short, they were ‘primitives’ whom it was practically a mercy to baptise and enslave. [1992:23]

Thus from these early roots, prejudice, racial myths and stereotypes progressively came to be adopted in American culture. Linking this to the present, Brodtkin states that “bondage of Africans was the template for an enduring organization of capitalism in which race was the basis for the organization of work” (2000:243). She explains,

Although race was initially invented to justify a brutal regime of slave labor that was profitable to Southern planters, race making has become a key process by which the United States continues to organize and understand labor and national belonging. [Brodtkin 2000:245]

What this indicates is that racial stratification is not only embedded in American labour discourse and practice, but that it is also a necessary component in maintaining a capitalist system that requires exploitation in order to sustain itself. Ethnographic research conducted in the U.S. demonstrates how these attitudes have developed over time and in various settings. For example, in the 1930s Powdermaker noted during fieldwork in the American Deep South³² a comment made in the community she was staying in: “A [white] woman said it was a good thing that the Negroes ‘are so thriftless and spend all they get,’ because this means they must remain laborers ‘and we need them to work for us’” (1939:118).

In a more recent study, Brodtkin (1998) also tracked shifts in attitudes toward race in America. As an example, she described how “in Pennsylvania’s steel industry, because African American and eastern and southern European immigrants did dirty jobs, this was often proof enough that they too were dirty” (1998:52).

Both studies raise important points regarding the creation and maintenance of racist stereotypes by showing how the need for increasing economic development

³² The Deep South is a group of southwestern states that has historically been slower and more reticent in adopting laws and practices for racial integration as compared to most other American states.

has become a major impetus behind the justification of racial stratification and non-integrative practices. Over time, this belief in racial disparity has progressively developed to form social and economic divisions in the U.S.

In South Africa, the process of colonialism played out differently, as spelled out in the introductory chapter. In brief, when the English first came to South Africa, they did not need to import slaves, instead simply taking over the indigenous population already there. By the time the Afrikaners, descendants of the Dutch, came into power in the middle of the 1900s, South Africa's booming mining industry was in need of cheap labour. The already subjugated black majority population was an ideal source of manpower and thus came to be increasingly exploited. Eventually, this led to the systematic segregation of black South Africans by the elite white minority, which was institutionally denying them access to all but the most menial of labour.

In both South Africa and the United States, racial discrimination has been a major means of social stratification to ensure that the less desirable albeit necessary jobs are performed. In South Africa this has meant that black workers have been forced to take on dangerous jobs in mines where their health was compromised and family life was disrupted due to work being available only in remote locations. Today black people are still less likely to be found in high-paying jobs than their white counterparts³³. Similarly, black workers in the U.S. are more likely to end up in low-paying jobs than white workers. Consider that 9.6 percent of employed black Americans are living in poverty, compared to 4.3 percent of employed white Americans (U.S Department of Labor 2001:7). Even when employed, black people

³³ See section on Fieldwork Methods on Page 15 for relevant statistics.

are more than twice as likely to live in poverty, meaning that on average they are earning lower wages than white workers.

From these examples, it becomes evident that historical belief in racist ideology in the U.S. and South Africa, originally used to justify slave importation and indigenous subjugation, has led to a modern-day need to redress racial imbalances and discrimination in the workforce to ensure equal and fair representation for all. To that end, both South Africa and the U.S. have developed affirmative action policies in an attempt to institutionally achieve greater balance among the labour force.

The American government began to implement plans as early as 1961 to officially legislate employment equity across the country, and on September 24, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson issued Executive Order 11246 mandating affirmative action policies in the American workforce (Pearson Education 2005). In South Africa, apartheid was officially abolished in 1994 and a black party was voted into power during the country's first democratic election. In 1998, the Employment Equity Act was created to help the black majority enter and establish positions in the workforce on equal footing with white people and thereby redress the years of discrimination.

What this abbreviated summary has shown are the contexts in which Americans and South Africans now find themselves in with regard to how issues of "race" are being managed through government policies pertaining to labour. In both cases we see an extensive history of colonization leading to the ideological subordination of black people to their white counterparts, and also we see the

modern political efforts at rectifying these racial inequalities. However, “unlike most other countries in which minorities are targeted [e.g. the U.S.], in South Africa a previously disenfranchised majority is the beneficiary of such [affirmative action] policies” (Adam 1997:231). What the ethnographic and theoretical considerations in this section will show is that despite contrasting black/white proportions in the two nations and their somewhat different development, much of the same discourse is arising with regards to affirmative action in both countries.

Highlights of Affirmative Action Policies

While plans were being implemented as early as 1961 to officially legislate employment equity in the United States, it was on September 24, 1965, that President Lyndon Johnson issued Executive Order 11246 mandating affirmative action policies in the American workforce (Pearson Education 2005).

As part of the Code of Federal Regulations Pertaining to U.S. Department of Labor (CFR), Executive Order 11246 describes the following as the general purpose of affirmative action programs:

An affirmative action program is a management tool designed to ensure equal employment opportunity. A central premise underlying affirmative action is that, absent discrimination, over time a contractor's workforce, generally, will reflect the gender, racial and ethnic profile of the labor pools from which the contractor recruits and selects. [U.S. Department of Labor 2002]

The goal is clearly to give all Americans equal treatment in terms of hiring procedures and treatment at work, with the intent to systematically eradicate discrimination against minorities in the labour force.

One thing that is important to clarify is what is meant by the term “minorities”. This information is actually buried quite deeply in the legislation, and comes to be defined as the following: “American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic individuals are considered minorities for purposes of the Executive Order” (U.S. Department of Labor 1998). On account of the focus for this research project, this thesis is primarily concerned with how these policies apply to black Americans.

In terms of the types of businesses obligated to practice affirmative action, the regulations indicate that companies with over 50 employees and government contracts of \$50 000 or more must comply with Executive Order 11246 (U.S. Department of Labor 1996). While racial quotas are described as being “expressly forbidden”, the program does outline how businesses should go about determining whom they should be hiring. Labelled “availability”, this is “an estimate of the number of qualified minorities or women available for employment in a given job group, expressed as a percentage of all qualified persons available for employment in the job group” (U.S. Department of Labor 1996). The term “estimate” may be considered problematic, as it does not describe who is ultimately responsible for making this projection, nor the process through which such numbers may be calculated.

One further important point about the policies is the consequences faced by businesses refusing to comply with the regulations. It is not advisable for companies to treat this issue lightly, as neglect on the part of businesses to follow the prescriptions of affirmative action means that “a contractor could lose its government

contracts or subcontracts or be debarred, i.e., declared ineligible for any future government contracts” (U.S. Department of Labor 1996).

In South Africa, the Employment Equity Act sets up a similar set of goals to those of the U.S. Specifically, it outlines,

The purpose of the Act is to achieve equity in the workplace, by (a) promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and (b) implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce. [South African Department of Labour 1998]

Designated groups, as mentioned previously, include black people (described as a “generic term meaning Africans, Coloured and Indians”), women and people with disabilities (South African Department of Labour 1998:Chapter 1). The policies are intended to apply only to the qualified people within these groups rather than to the population as a whole.

As in the American model, the South African legislation also applies to companies with more than fifty employees. However, there is a special category for companies employing fifty to 150 workers. These businesses must follow the same practice as large companies although they have to report their employment equity plan to the Director-General only every second year, whereas large companies are required to submit yearly reports (South African Department of Labour 1998:Chapter 1). Furthermore, failure to comply with the Employment Equity Act could lead to a hearing with South Africa’s Labour Court and may include heavy fines for business owners.

New Racism

At this point we turn once again to the cross-cultural comparison of the impacts of affirmative action policies. According to Jacobson, “very few Americans in prominent, responsible positions are willing to admit to the blatant, avowedly racist stances taken by some politicians and citizens in years past” (1985:307). Arguably, the situation is much the same in South Africa, for with the end of the apartheid regime has come a vested interest in portraying the nation as progressive and open-minded, hence the prominence of the “New South Africa” slogan featured everywhere from highway billboards welcoming travelers, to television commercials sponsored by the government. After many years of racial discrimination, both South African and American public policies are committed to a new era of social equality and inclusion.

It is therefore troubling that despite the goals of affirmative action policies (i.e. the eradication of racism in the workforce), there is a considerable degree of negative criticism generated around them. However, what is happening is not the same racism of colonial predecessors, but a subtler form that is more “politically correct” than it is overt. According to Jacobson, in the U.S.,

The new racism... is based on feelings that evolved out of the civil rights era — feelings that blacks are making and winning too many demands from the government. Thus the new racism is elicited by symbolic issues [such as] affirmative action. [Jacobson 1985:307]

What results is frustration being directed toward the *policies* and other factors rather than to “black people” or “race” outright. In this way, official regulations become, for some, a justification and mask for implicitly racist beliefs.

Gregory's (1993) study of Lefrak City housing policies shows these processes at work. Gregory set out to examine "how African-American women in Lefrak City, a black apartment complex in Queens County, New York, contested racialized images of their housing complex and its residents held by white activists in the surrounding area" (1993:24). He was interested in understanding "how racialized groups contest and rearticulate racial ideologies and meanings" (Gregory 1993:24).

As part of his research, Gregory outlined a discrimination suit filed by the Justice Department against the organization in charge of the settlement, stating that it treated potential black renters unfairly compared to potential white renters. Eventually, "the Justice Department agreed to drop the suit if the Lefrak Organization would end discrimination in apartment rentals and give a month's free rent to 50 black families to assist them in moving into predominantly white buildings" (Gregory 1993:25).

The key point here is to note that although not directly expressed as such, the Lefrak Organization was essentially ordered to implement affirmative action in order to bring equity into its housing policies, thereby helping black people who had hitherto been discriminated against. What is fascinating is not necessarily this legal process *per se*, but the reactions that arose from it. Consider the following excerpt from Gregory's transcripts of an interview with a Lefrak resident who had seen these changes taking place:

All of a sudden we just saw different people coming in. And I keep saying to you that it has nothing to do with the color. There were always black people here when I moved in. They were friendly people. They were very high-class people – rich people, some of them. And you would never think anything of seeing another black person move in – or another – or another – nothing to do with it. But when you saw these people coming in – in their *undershirts*,

and their hair – and their *staggering*. It really was the most *horrible* thing you ever saw. There were some good people too – but it was just such a drastic change. It was such a *shock* – it was the shock value. It was just unbelievable. And that's what *really* did it.³⁴ [Gregory 1993:26]

Clearly, the person being interviewed is determined to come across as not being “racist”, and may indeed believe that he or she is not. Instead, the focus is being redirected to the process that took place once the new policy was implemented. It implies that when discriminatory renting practices were in place, everything was running smoothly, but that when black people were given equal access, the quality of life went down in the neighbourhood. The person being interviewed either believes or wants to convince the interviewer that social problems do not lie with colour, but rather with class.

This is not unlike certain comments that I heard myself while speaking to people in South Africa. Amy, John and Gerald, the three young, white business owners, explained to me that although none of their thirteen employees were black, this had nothing to do with race, but rather with a potential employee's ability to “fit in”. What they explained was that for them, hiring procedures were “not an issue of racism, but of classism”, and as one also added, “it is about fitting into the company culture... into corporate culture” and that “the [black] culture doesn't bother me.” In a review of modern anthropological debates on race, Harrison addresses this shift in racial perspectives by pointing out the following:

As racism assumes more subtle and elusive forms in the contemporary world, it is being reconfigured without “race” as a classificatory device for demarcating difference. The once largely biologized notion of race is now commonly being recoded as “culture”. [Harrison 1999:610]

³⁴ All extra markings in the transcription are copied from the original text.

Thus what we see in both of these examples is a redirection of exclusionary attitudes onto what are perceived as “safer”, more politically correct factors such as class, culture and policy. In South Africa, affirmative action policies have been a common target, as shown by frequent off-handed comments such as, “That’s black economic empowerment for you” to express dissatisfaction at various everyday problems. Today, instead of blaming black workers for delays or errors, some white people claim the policy is the source of their frustration whereas during apartheid it was more common to direct it openly toward black people. Because such behaviour is now illegal, anger toward a “policy” may be used to mask a deeper racial resentment. Brodtkin confirms a similar phenomenon in America, stating, “Western capitalism has... pursued political and economic policies that make nations at once multiracial and racist (or otherwise xenophobic)” (2000:250).

Ultimately, Jacobson’s concept of “new racism” indicates that even with South Africa’s and America’s institutionalization of affirmative action policies, hesitation toward racial integration and perhaps even outright rejection of it are still being expressed among the people who are affected by these policies. It is an indicator of how laws “on paper” are not necessarily being accepted “on the ground.”

Reverse Racism

In South Africa and the U.S., affirmative action policies are seeking to redress the racial discrimination historically experienced by the black populations. However, as described throughout the ethnography there is an ironic inversion taking place that is affecting both countries – an increasing number of white people, particularly

males, are expressing a fear of displacement on account of the numbers of black people now given equal access to the labour market. In other words, white people are afraid of becoming the "new PDIs" (previously disadvantaged people).

According to Adam, "what is seen as a great hope for so many disadvantaged blacks has triggered an equally intense rejection by those whites who perceive themselves as the new victims of reverse discrimination" (1997:232).

This was a theme repeatedly brought up throughout the course of this research. During one interview, for example, Indira, a South African woman of Indian origin, lent credibility to this claim, saying that affirmative action was "racism in reverse" and commented that "in twenty years the white male will be disadvantaged on account of these policies".

In the U.S. context, Harrison similarly asks, "has our peculiar tradition of anti-people-of-color racism grown more insidious, or has it actually given way to a prevalent form of "reverse racism" that discriminates against whites... as the new victims of a 'transmuted Jim Crow'" (Harrison 1999:610)? From this we can ask, how is this "reverse racism" discourse being generated around affirmative action policies, and how is it manifested in people's daily lives?

Looking first to South Africa, a particular encounter during my own fieldwork nicely illustrates this process. Rupert, a white male, was introduced in the ethnographic section concerned with South African workers, and during our interview expressed his frustration at recent unsuccessful attempts to find a new, higher-paying job. Rupert is young, educated, and had extensive experience in the IT field, all in all making him an excellent candidate for the types of jobs he was

applying for. However, he was resentful at hiring procedures and, as he claimed, *not* because he was racist, but because they appeared to favour black applicants over white.

He explained to me that while looking up jobs at a particular company's website, he saw two postings for identical positions, one that specified that "the position is affirmative action" and one that did not. The "AA position", he said, had few requirements, things such as "self-starter" and "basic knowledge" being on the list, or gave broad descriptions such as "network engineer" which, according to him, was "not a real skill". On the other hand, the other posting had 1.5 to two pages of requirements, including things like "having a degree" and "five years experience", and listed very specific skills and certifications. Furthermore, he conveyed to me that "affirmative action positions sometimes give up to eighty percent higher wages next to comparable non-AA positions".

Clearly, Rupert felt that he was put at a disadvantage in this situation. He said that since he was never a direct supporter of apartheid, he does not understand why he should pay for it. Knowing that he was qualified for the work, he was angry that those with fewer qualifications should be hired for the same positions, or even instead of him. Without directly comparing himself, it appeared that Rupert was feeling a similar type of discrimination faced by black people for generations.

However, the goal of affirmative action is intended to be progression toward racial balance, not pointing the finger of racism in another direction, which is what Rupert, and many others like him, have come to experience in the "New South Africa". As Adam says,

Since repealing apartheid legislation will not on its own redress its legacies, affirmative action has been embraced...as the appropriate remedy and restitution. At the same time, among all the issues for potential conflict, preferential hiring according to race ranks highest, not least because of its implications for job security and demands for replacement. [1997:231]

In the United States, a group of political scientists conducted an extensive study, using national surveys, to “examine the relationship between blatant racial prejudice and anger toward affirmative action” (Kuklinski et al. 1997:402). They predicted that “white resistance to affirmative action is not unyielding and unalterably fixed” and indeed their experiment seemed to prove that “although many whites strongly resist affirmative action, they express support for making extra efforts to help African-Americans” (Kuklinski et al. 1997:402).

While this study certainly was broad in scope, it does help to highlight several issues important to the theme of this section. For example, it has shown that many white Americans are not averse to policies aimed at helping black Americans. However, it also indicated that “to continue to associate issues of race with affirmative action can only provoke yet more anger among the majority of whites in this country” (Kuklinski et al. 1997:416). The implication for affirmative action policies is that they are more in need of “reshaping” rather than “dismantling”, thereby “moving away from the categorical and exclusionary language that has come to be associated with affirmative action” (Kuklinski et al. 1997:416).

This would appear to correlate with Rupert’s interview – although he was angry at what he felt was employment discrimination based on race, his statement of “not being racist” at least acknowledged that using race as a means of exclusion is inappropriate. It is not surprising that similar attitudes are expressed in both

countries because “as is the case with other controversial issues, many of the arguments in South Africa are transplanted from the United States, where divergent connotations of affirmative action have produced a great deal of public dissension” (Adam 1997:232).

Throughout the ethnographic material in this thesis, people like Rupert and Jan, among others, have come to voice their concerns about the potential displacement of white workers. In truth, although labour restructuring in South Africa is both inevitable and necessary, it is only through achieving equal levels of skills and experience in education and training that there can start to be equality in the workforce. Since black people have historically and systematically been excluded from these sectors, the sudden and violent push that some feel is imminent is, in fact, impossible. In the United States, where the white population makes up the majority at 67.3 percent, the likelihood of any major displacement through increased integration of black workers is even less plausible (U.S. Department of Commerce 2004:3).

While there is a great deal of fear and criticism being generated in both countries (particularly on the part of white males), there nonetheless appears to be some positive feedback arising from the topic of affirmative action. As indicated throughout interviews and through examples such as the Kuklinski study, even with the concerns voiced over affirmative action policies there is a simultaneous acknowledgment that black people should not be discriminated against on the basis of race. These may be telling indicators of shifts in public attitude toward the

eradication of racial discrimination and the acknowledgment that past inequalities should no longer be maintained.

Affirmative action policies stand to play an important role in helping this process to move forward. If properly administered over time and through careful planning, they have the potential to provide practical tools for the institutionalization of equitable business practice so that racial equality becomes a normative process of gradual, sustainable change. In addition, these policies could be strengthened if coupled with alternative approaches on the part of business owners to help with these transitions. In South Africa, these have included increasing use of ratings agencies and employee training programs, as well as the placement of trained facilitators in companies who specialize in assessing the needs of employees and assisting with the implementation of black empowerment models. Utilizing this type of holistic approach may help ease the transition to a more equitable workplace.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

In 1994, at the height of South Africa's transition from apartheid to a democratic state, an American sociologist wrote the following:

No one truly believes South Africa is moving toward an era of tolerant pluralism, where the incorporation of the black majority into a common race-blind political framework will by itself resolve the social fragmentation and dislocation associated with deeply embedded structural inequalities. [Murray 2004:3]

I am very pleased to note that among the South Africans I spoke with, there are many who would refute this claim. Indeed some would see employment equity policies as tools for achieving just the sort of "tolerant pluralism" that Murray describes.

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to develop the original goals set forth in the introduction. These include the application of a multidisciplinary approach to complement the ethnographic data; consideration of the spectrum of meaning created between what is intended by affirmative action policies and what is experienced by South Africans; and the attempt to problematize and ask questions of the various social forces at play instead of merely documenting them.

It is true that many of the issues presented in this thesis have highlighted the negative impacts of affirmative action policies. This was not merely an editorial tactic but rather an attempt to accurately present the information as it was conveyed to me. Among many of the participants in this study as well as various acquaintances I met throughout my visits to South Africa, criticism of affirmative action seems to resound more strongly than does praise for the policies. I have observed this to be the case in general during formal interviews and in everyday

discourse beyond the workplace. It is for this reason that a strong portion of this thesis is dedicated to expressing these views.

However, it would be grossly inaccurate to neglect mentioning that on a significant number of occasions, criticism was combined with optimism regarding the potential of labour policy in South Africa. These ideas were often expressed near the end of interviews when participants were given an opportunity to add any thoughts they found relevant to the topic. In reviewing the transcripts, I have observed that the majority of participants were careful to point out what they perceived as the *positive* impacts arising from these policies. After all, such laws were implemented with the intent of dealing with past injustice, and to this end many participants agreed that they appear to have had a certain amount of success.

Consider some of the comments made by several of the participants discussed earlier in this paper. Lungile, who generally had a great deal of criticism for affirmative action policies, nonetheless believes that “twenty years from now all the loopholes will be closed” implying that problems with the policies would be resolved and that ultimately “affirmative action can help.”

Patrick, who planned to leave South Africa, nonetheless claimed to be “cautiously optimistic” about its future. In reference to people’s complaints about affirmative action, he said that “there’d be few grumbles if people saw how others lived”, indicating that the policies had the potential to improve the lives of those who had been discriminated against during apartheid. He stated furthermore that he felt the government was doing a good job, and that “it’s easier to criticize than to come up with suggestions.”

Sfiso, who regards the legislation as a “necessary evil” still conceded that affirmative action “helps to ‘conscientize’ [sic] certain parts of society”, meaning it encourages people to consider more carefully the treatment of workers based on race. Even Kenny looks at it as “an opportunity to improve the lot and level the playing field, which was not possible before.”

A number of people used the phrase “redressing the past” to explain the goals of affirmative action and felt that, at least symbolically, it presents a viable means to achieve this. As Kenny put it, “because of affirmative action, blacks can speak with courage and conviction” and, in principle, start to claim the same rights as white workers. At the same time, several people pointed out that while “affirmative action laws aren’t bad, there are still problems with their interpretation,” as Indira put it. This has been made evident throughout this thesis in the critiques of workers waged against such policies.

Ultimately, while the creation of a racially diverse workforce may be troubling for some, it should not be forgotten that increased exposure to colleagues from various backgrounds might also help allay xenophobic fears instilled through years of enforced segregation. In considering the changes in the South African workforce since 1994, Patrick says that the greater number of black workers “has brought different approaches, different cultures, outlooks, ways of perceiving.” He reflected that on account of this, “We [meaning, “white people”] learned quite a lot as well.” Cindy, who showed personal and professional commitment to helping integrate black workers into the labour force, said that “Interaction is so important; it’s the one-to-one relationships that show us what connects and divides us.”

Therefore the workers who have managed to successfully adapt to this change can find their lives enriched in many ways. For example, among white South Africans who were not supporters of the apartheid regime, affirmative action may provide an opportunity to express solidarity with their colleagues. In addition, those who *were* supporters in the past now have a chance to make amends, thereby indirectly continuing the positive work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Finally, for black South Africans, affirmative action not only provides opportunities that were previously denied, but it also has the potential to help them overcome fears of subjugation by allowing them to finally and rightfully feel as equals in their own country. In the words of South Africa's president, what remains to be achieved "calls for what may perhaps be called a miracle of true national reconciliation, and the miraculous discovery that, after all, South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, united in the diversity" (Mbeki 2005:1).

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Appendix A

The Generic Scorecard

Element	Category	Indicator	Working Points	Interim Target	Compliance Target
OWNERSHIP Measures effective ownership of companies by black people Code 100 Total Points = 20	Voting Rights	Exercisable Voting Rights in the Enterprise in the hands of black people	3		25%+1 vote
		Exercisable Voting Rights in the Enterprise in the hands of black women	2		10%
	Economic Interest	Economic Interest of black people in the Enterprise	4		25%
		Economic Interest of black women in the Enterprise	2		10%
		Economic Interest of the following black natural people in the Enterprise: - black designated groups - black participants in Employee Ownership Schemes - black beneficiaries of Broad-Based Ownership Schemes; or - black participants in Co-operatives	1		2.5%
	Realisation Points	Ownership fulfillment	1		No Restrictions
		Net value	7		25%
	Bonus Points	Involvement in the ownership of the Enterprise of black new entrants	2		10%
		Involvement in the ownership of the Enterprise of black participants: - in Employee Ownership Schemes - of Broad-Based Ownership Schemes - Co-operatives	1		10%
MANAGEMENT CONTROL Measures effective control of companies by black people Code 200 Total Points = 10	Board Participation	Exercisable Voting Rights of black Board members using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	3		50%
		Black Executive Directors using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	2		50%
	Top Management	Black Senior Top Management using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	3		40%
		Black Other Top Management using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	2		40%
	Bonus Point	Black Independent Non-Executive Board Members	1		40%

Employment Equity Measures initiatives intended to achieve equity in the workplace Code 300 Total Points = 15		Black Disabled Employees as a percentage of all employees using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	2	2%	3%
		Black employees in Senior Management as a percentage of all such employees using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	5	43%	60%
		Black employees in Middle Management as a percentage of all such employees using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	4	63%	75%
		Black employees in Junior Management as a percentage of all such employees using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	4	68%	80%
	Bonus Point	Bonus points for meeting and exceeding EAP targets in each of the above categories	3		
Skills Development Measures the extent to which employers develop the competencies of black employees Code 400 Total Points = 15	Skills Development Spend on Learning Programmes	Skills Development Expenditure on Learning Programmes specified in the Learning Programme Matrix for black employees as a percentage of Leivable Amount using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	6		3%
		Skills Development Expenditure on Learning Programmes specified in the Learning Programme Matrix for black employees with disabilities as a percentage of Leivable Amount using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	3		0.3%
	Learnerships	Number of black employees participating in Learnerships or Category B, C and D Programmes as a percentage of total employees using the Adjusted Recognition for Gender	6		5%
Preferential Procurement Measures the extent to which companies buy goods and services from BEE compliant suppliers as well as black-owned entities Code 500 Total Points = 20		BEE Procurement Spend from all Suppliers based on the B-BBEE Procurement Recognition Levels as a percentage of Total Measured Procurement Spend	12	50%	70%
		BEE Procurement Spend from Qualifying Small Enterprises or from Exempted Micro Enterprises based on the applicable B-BBEE Procurement Recognition Levels as a percentage of Total Measured Procurement Spend	3	10%	15%
		B-BBEE Procurement Spend from any of the following Suppliers as a percentage of Total Measured Procurement Spend: - Suppliers that are 50% black owned (3 of % points); or - Suppliers that are 30% black women owned (2 out of 5 points)	5	15%	20%
Enterprise		Average annual value of all Enterprise Development Contributions and Sector Specific	15		3% of Net Profit After Tax

Development Measures the extent to which companies carry out initiatives contributing to enterprise development Code 600 Total Points = 15		Programmes made by the Measured Entity as a percentage of the target			
Socio-ECONOMIC Development Measures the extent to which companies support socio-economic development Code 700 Total Points = 5		Average annual value of all Socio-Economic Development Contributions made by the Measured Entity as a percentage of the target	5		1% of Net Profit After Tax

Source: <http://www.empowerdex.co.za/content/Default.aspx?ID=51>