

Multiple meanings of the middle class in Soweto, South Africa

Mosa Phadi and Claire Ceruti

University of Johannesburg

E-mail: clairec@uj.ac.za; claireceruti@gmail.com

mmphadi@uj.ac.za

Abstract

This study investigated the meanings of middle class amongst those who label themselves middle class. 2559 people were surveyed in Soweto, South Africa biggest township. The study revealed that a diverse number of people call themselves middle class and defined class in terms of ability to afford basic goods. The label middle class seems also to denote self-sufficiency, responsibility and social mobility. The paper concludes that studies of the middle class does not seem to focus on how social location affects the scope of people's social world and their range of comparison.

Keywords: class, middle class, identity, Soweto, social location, self-sufficiency

'Middle class ... means we can afford stuff. We can afford to go to a movie or a restaurant in the middle of the week.' (Two young men, wearing branded clothing, interviewed at the Soweto Wine Festival in 2006).

'I am working and I can get all the basics of life - I can manage. I'm not earning that much but can get the basics. The middle class to me is everyone who is working. [...] The rich you can see. They are not like us who wait until month end'. (Sales worker wearing a shirt with a frayed collar, interviewed at a mid-market Soweto shopping centre in 2006).

This paper focuses on what middle class identity means to those who accept the label 'middle class'. The term seems to have multiple meanings and purposes, which reflect the social location of those claiming the identity. It is an empirical paper based on a 2006 survey of 2559 people from Soweto, South Africa's biggest township. The paper is structured as follows: the section that immediately follows discusses middle class identities starting with an anecdote of two women in Soweto and section two discusses the research design.

1. Middle class identities

We begin with the anecdote of an uncomfortable encounter between two Soweto women who both see themselves as middle class. The encounter powerfully illustrates the diversity of those who identify themselves as middle, encapsulates the processes by which people middle themselves, and therefore helps us to focus on what is and is not covered in the existing literature. The encounter was captured for a research film during the final phase of our research (Phadi, 2009).

The women were invited to meet another middle class person to discuss what they had in common. The cultural and material gulf between the women is apparent from the time Hilda arrives in a silver Mercedes at the informal settlement where Andronica lives in a shack. Andronica slumps when she sees her visitor's car; Hilda is nervous about leaving her car unattended. It is easy to imagine that, without the research, these women would only meet if Andronica knocked on Hilda's door looking for domestic work in Diepkloof extension, the plush section of Soweto where Hilda lives now that her businesses are successful. When Andronica asks if Hilda wants to eat with her hands or with a spoon, Hilda wants a fork. When Hilda asks for a knife to eat with, Andronica can only find a bread knife.

After the meal, Hilda demands to know how Andronica can believe herself middle class. Unlike most of her neighbours in the informal settlement, Andronica explains, she eats every day, she has a generator, she owns her shack, and her husband's work has become more regular. Hilda begins listing all Andronica lacks – kitchen sink, washing machine, plastered walls, more rooms, employment. Andronica is less articulate than

Hilda, partly because Hilda conducts the conversation in English. But Andronica defends her right to the middle. 'You, I look [at] you – you are better than me.' She points to Hilda's gold necklace. Hilda argues back, 'If it is me and Maponya, the owner of Maponya mall, the two of us, where do you place us?' (Maponya, who established himself as a business man in the 1970s, before the end of apartheid, recently caused an up-market mall to be built in Soweto.) She continues, 'I feel I am not Maponya, Maponya is too high for me'. Andronica reiterates, 'But for me, you are not a middle class'. Only after Hilda leaves does Andronica, annoyed, finally label Hilda: 'That lady, she is rich.' To the interviewer, Hilda declares that Andronica is delusional to see herself as middle class.

South African scholarship offered little insight here because recent work on identity does not consider how people class themselves, and recent work on class neglects identity. Identity studies since the end of apartheid tend to focus on racial, national, and ethnic identities (such as Grossberg et al 2006, Alan 2006, Vale 2003) with very little consideration of class identity such as might be encountered in studies of the apartheid era (such as Bozzoli (1987), Limb 2003). Those which mention class (Erasmus 2005; Zegeye et al 2000; Roefs 2000) are more interested in 'the complex ways in which race intersects with class to produce particular racialised patterns of inequality' (Erasmus, 2005; 13) than how people are classing themselves. Meanwhile scholars of class towards the end of apartheid have mapped class structure (Crankshaw 1993, Seekings and Natrass 2005), and debated the size and composition of the contemporary black middle class (Southall 2004, Schlemmer 2005, Muller 2006), but none deal with class identity, while older studies focus on proletarian consciousness.

In our study, middle class identities are expressed with a contextual texture which is unique to how class is perceived in South Africa in the decades after apartheid, but several processes resemble studies from elsewhere, such as observations that '... middle-class, individualized identities [are] generated by a continuous process of comparison 'up' and 'down' (Crompton 2008: 92; see also Bottero 2005: 240–242). Savage (2002: 64), Mendez (2008: 222) and Devine (2005: 153) note that, in the US and Britain, 'middle class' means 'ordinary' or 'normal'. Kelley and Evans (1995) attribute this to 'reference-group effects': we tend to associate with people similar to ourselves and see the world as an enlarged version of this reference group. 'Even very high-status people place many others above themselves, and very low status people see others even lower... hence, most people locate themselves near the middle of the class hierarchy' (Kelley and Evans 1995: 157).

However these studies look for an overarching definition of middle class and do not probe under the skin of 'ordinary' and 'normal'. We discovered multiple meanings, even amongst people who share a superficial definition of the term, as in the quotes at the beginning. Deshpande (2003) notes in India: 'it is striking that hardly anyone wishes to decline membership [to the middle class] and even those who are ineligible wish to be

included' (Deshpande 2003, 130), so middle class works as a kind of 'symbolic container'. Thus the purposes of claiming middle class identities are also multiple, and go beyond locating yourself in a social hierarchy (particularly where becoming middle class was previously curtailed by racial or colonial domination). The fervor with which Andronica and Hilda each defend their middle class identity shows that more is invested here. Urciuoli (1995) describes his respondents, Puerto Ricans living in New York, as 'really poor', but they call themselves middle class. To them, it means 'neither rich nor poor' but it is also a 'generic and morally loaded, cultural identity representing the triumph of individual virtue which includes good money management' (Urciuoli 1995). Middle class also implied possible advance through schooling children. Parekh (2009) notes that class identity may reflect 'what we wish to make of ourselves' (Parekh 2008, 267).

The multiple meanings and purposes of claiming a middle class identity seem only to confirm that 'the connection between class location and cultural identity appears to have unraveled' (Bottero 2004, 987). Following Bourdieu (1986), she tries to solve this by collapsing social identity and social position. Classed practices (cultures for Savage (2006); habitus (a set of dispositions and tastes) for Bourdieu (1986)) not only reflect class but constitute it. But to thus explain Andronica and Hilda, Bottero would have to make social identity an entirely unconscious process with no self-reflexivity¹, in which self-description is arbitrary. If the middle class is constituted by particular tastes, as in Bourdieu's study of France, then Andronica and Hilda's encounter merely emphasises their class difference. Hilda's taste is beyond Andronica's reach, and indeed most of it – Hilda's love of imported Italian furniture and her preference for Portugal – beyond Andronica's imagination. Bottero explains no more about Soweto's middle class identities than Kelley and Evans, who she cites extensively.²

It is only when you stop trying to tease a single meaning out of 'middle class', that you are able to see that people's social position shows through what they invest in the symbolic container labeled middle class. (By social position here we mean class but also, for example, labour-market stratifications within classes (see Ceruti 2010) and age.) We re-establish a link between 'where we stand in the world and how we see ourselves' (Bottero, 2005; 10). Olin-Wright (1989) concedes to Brenner (1989) that '...lived experience is essential for explaining why members of classes tend to develop [certain] identities' (Olin-Wright 1989, 207). Lived experience, however, is classed. Like Callinicos (2006a, 2006b) we hold that the formation of any 'collective subject' is 'irreducibly contingent' – we are agents who form subjectivities in specific, historic contexts – but different agents are variously limited or empowered by social structures³ (which we inherit, reproduce, and transform, sometimes only half-consciously as we go about our daily lives).

Finally, how are we using identity here? We accept that identities may be 'multiple and mobile' and that 'all identities... [are] continuously intersected and informed by identities constructed through other systems...' (Allen 2006: 57). We make no claims

for centrality of class identities (we did not ask our respondents 'who are you?' but prompted 'what class are you?') although we note that people readily classed themselves. Further, we assume that identity is not just naming or belonging – it is also a 'process of construction of meaning' (Castells 1997: 6, see also Jenkins 1996). Finally, rather than conceiving identity as '...self-categories which define the individual in terms of his or her shared similarities with members of certain social categories' (Ellemers et al 1999: 12) we use Massey's (1999: 6) formulation where identity is a place or position 'formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location', because there was little group identity in descriptions of middle class identities.

Next we outline the methodology and situate Soweto, before examining whether Soweto's middle class identifiers are 'structurally' middle class.

2. Research Design

This paper arises from a broader investigation of class in Soweto. There were four phases. In the first phase we recorded 51 informal, exploratory conversations with people around the township, usually starting with a question: 'what class are you? How do you know?' The shortest was around five minutes, more than half were between 20 and 40 minutes and several lasted an hour or more. We photographed respondents if possible.

These interviews informed the survey questions for the second phase. Fieldworkers used questionnaires to interview 2328 people out of 2553 who were randomly but proportionately selected from a sampling frame stratified into informal settlements, mixed areas, richer areas and hostels according to socio-economic indicators from the 2001 Census. A Kish grid was used at the interview point to randomize the selection of the individual respondent. Technical details are contained in the endnote⁴. The survey interviews lasted up to an hour, collected around 200 variables for each respondent, and included a set of questions inviting respondents to accept or reject the eight class identities most commonly mentioned in the exploratory conversations (poor, middle, working, 'cheeseboy', second, upper, tycoon, lower). They were able to accept more than one, or reject all. In the exploratory interviews, some people adopted more than one class identity.

The third phase of the research returned to 72 survey respondents. Semi-structured interviews probed notions of class and their identities. Two people were interviewed from each multi-person household, preferably one woman and one man, preferably from different generations.

Finally, the research film 'zoomed in' on five survey respondents who had identified themselves as middle class, using repeat interviews. The five were selected from an initial selection of 25 respondents both to reflect the diversity of middle-class identifiers and for their comfort in front of the camera.

3. Situating Soweto

Soweto has approximately 1 million residents, according to the 2001 census. It represents a slice rather than the full extent of class in South Africa, but is much more heterogeneous than most townships in terms of language, housing, living standards and occupations. The township has a long history of classed vocabulary (Bonner and Seagal 1998; Mayer 1977). Apartheid's Group Areas Act forced the black middle class to live alongside workers. There is evidence of an exodus from the township since group areas were lifted, related also to upward career mobility, but its extent is difficult to measure. Still, some people remain despite the means to leave because of family ties, home ownership, or familiarity. In 2001, Sowetans averaged above Africans in the rest of the country on several basic indicators of well-being (Table 1), but remained well below whites. Soweto also has below the national average of the highest income earners. This middling status may contribute to middle class identities, but people seldom referenced places outside the township in describing middle class identities.

Table 1: Soweto compared to Gauteng and South Africa. (Source: Census 2001, compiled by the authors)

	Whole country		Gauteng			Sowetans
	% whole country	% all black african	Total %	white %	black african %	
Piped water inside dwelling	65.9	17.9	47.2	85.8	33.6	27.6
Piped water inside yard	14.6	33.8	36.4	9.7	45.8	60.4
Communal standpipe, within 200m	5.4	13.3	6.8	1.1	8.8	6.1
Community standpipe beyond 200m	6.3	15.2	7.1	3	8.5	5.3
All other sources	7.8	19.8	2.5	0.4	3.3	0.6
Sanitation						
Flush toilet[1]	51.9	42.6	81.7	98.7	75.7	88.4
Chemical toilet, Pit latrine, bucket latrine	34.5	47.2	44	9.4	19.7	9.8
none	13.6	18.2	3.6	0.8	4.6	1.8
Household goods						
radio	73	68.7	77.4	94.6	72	76
fridge	51.2	39.9	62.1	97.5	49.8	63.5
tv	53.8	44.2	65.7	92.9	56.2	66
landline	24.4	12	32.4	76.8	17.7	27.5
computer	8.6	1.8	15.1	50.3	4	3.4
cell	32.3	24.6	45.1	78.3	34.5	31.9
Dwelling						
Brick house, including flat, townhouse	63.8	55.5	65.6	95	55.2	61.2
Shack not in backyard	12.3	15.5	16.9	0.3	22.8	9.8
Backyard room or shack	7.8	8.9	14.3	2.7	18.3	26
traditional dwelling	14.8	18.7	1.3	1	1.4	0.7
any other kind of dwelling	1.4	1.5	1.9	1	2.3	2.3
Languages						
english or afrikaans		1.2			1.8	0.9
isiZulu and isiNdebele		32.1			31.7	39.6
isixhosa		22.3			10.2	9.5
Sesotho		10			17.7	16.8
Setswana		10.3			11.3	14.4
All others		24.1			27.2	18.7
Employment status (population aged 16-65)						
employed	33.7	27.8	45	64.3	39.5	32.1
unemployed[2]	24	28.1	25.8	4.6	32.2	37.5
not economically active	42.3	44.1	29.2	31.2	28.3	30.4

Selecting a township has particular implications: first, because Soweto's inhabitants are largely black, race was muted when talking about class in the township context although race remains important in class identities in South Africa (Erasmus 2005). Second, the residential context encouraged people to think about consumption (the state of the house and its contents, for example) more than might be the case in other contexts. (See Zusman, 1985).

Table 2 shows the general work status of Sowetans in our survey. (This is not a class structure: occupation and employment status are, in our view, at best incomplete proxies for class). These categories were allowed to 'grow' from observation and careful inspection of the data. Unemployed here means reporting yourself unemployed, having no other activity, and being prepared to accept a job if offered. Fill-ins and partial workers are self-employed survivalists, or in very irregular unemployment. They do not regard their activities as viable and would take a job if offered. Employed work regularly for someone else. This, unusually, includes most teachers and nurses; occupation-based class schemes usually consider them professionals, but we see them as workers whose job is to 'produce' healthier or more skilled humans. Employed middle class are salaried but play a managerial role. Petite bourgeois are self-employed professionals or small businesses, not looking for work, who do not regularly employ more than one or two people.

Table 2: Work and worklessness in Soweto (Source: Soweto Survey)	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	Estimated percent of Sowetans (weighted)
Bourgeoisie	4	0%
Employed middle class	24	1%
Employed	582	23%
Partial workers	251	11%
Unemployed	535	23%
Fill ins	225	9%
Petite bourgeoisie	129	5%
Student	261	12%
Pensions, disability grants, looking after home or children, otherwise not in labour force	309	11%
Total	2284	100%

Service industries dominate employment in Soweto. Table 3 shows occupations of Sowetans. These include occupations of irregularly employed people and our employed middle class.

Table 3: Occupations of Sowetans (Source: Soweto Survey)

	%
Menial, not domestic (such as cleaners, waiters)	6
White collar routine (bank tellers and the like)	6
Domestic workers	3
Drivers and security guards	3
Semi-skilled manual (machine operators etc)	3
Artisinal (skilled, manual – such as carpenters)	2
Cashiers, retail sales and merchandisers	2
Teachers and nurses	1
Managers	1
Police and soldiers	1
Technicians	1
General labourers (unskilled heavy manual)	1
Supervisors (specifically)	1
Professionals, consultants, personal assistants and many administrators	2
Without occupation - Unemployed, pensioner, student etc.	66
Total	100

Next we turn to the question, are two thirds of Sowetans really middle-class?

4. Are Sowetans mostly middle class?

In this section, we want to establish, first, how many Sowetans could be categorized as middle class using various schemes, and second, whether those who call themselves middle class in our survey have something in common in their lifestyles, living standards, occupation or the like.

We said that 66 percent of Sowetans accepted the label middle class in our survey. It was the most widely accepted label, on its own and in combination with other labels. For comparison, around 40 percent accepted each of the labels working, lower and poor. Remember that respondents could accept or reject each of these labels. When we looked at how people combined class labels, 20 percent of Sowetans accepted only the middle class label and no other (Table 4).

Table 4: Combined Class Labels	Percent of Sowetans
Middle only	20
Middle plus lower/poor ⁵	14
Middle plus working	13
Lower/poor only	13
Working plus lower plus middle	10
None of the labels	7
Working class and no other	3
Other combinations with fewer than 5 percent each	20
Total	100

Schoen (2006) defines middle class by income bracket – those earning between R6455 (about \$926 and R11566 (about \$1662) per household per month. About 19 percent of respondents lived in households in the equivalent categories in our survey. (We estimated household income used the Living Standards Measure (LSM) in our survey, an index developed by marketers based on whether households have certain services and appliances.⁶) Is this the bulk of the 20 percent who call themselves middle with no other label? No, because only 45 percent of them fall within this range, and 42 percent are poorer than this.

Schlemmer (2005) defines the ‘core’ middle class (middle-middle and upper-middle) as executives, managers, and salaried professionals, which includes some teachers and nurses. This is around 5 percent of our survey respondents if we include all teachers and nurses. Some proportion of people who are unemployed, pensioners, in other occupations and so on live in households with core middle people and, in most occupation-based class schemes, would be counted as middle class. Our data on respondents’ households is not detailed enough to allocate people like this. But our data shows people with core middle occupations live in households with, on average, 2 other adults, so we could push this version of the middle class to about 15 percent of Sowetans. Muller (2006: 192) adapts Seekings and Natrass’ (2005: 247) occupation-based scheme to argue that the middle class is actually shrinking relative to other classes. Their middle class is composed of the semiprofessional category (teachers and nurses) and the intermediate class (routine white collar, skilled and supervisory workers). This definition pushes the proportion of middle class occupations in our survey to around 15 percent, and using a mean household size of three adults for such occupations, we can estimate 45 percent of Sowetans in middle class households. This would still leave one fifth of Sowetans, like Andronica, identifying themselves as middle class despite having no association, past or present, with any of these categories. Moreover, only 53 percent of skilled workers and 58 percent of supervisory workers call themselves middle class, while 58 percent of domestic workers and 62 percent of labourers call themselves middle class. So even if these definitions can explain part of the middle class identity, they cannot explain it all.

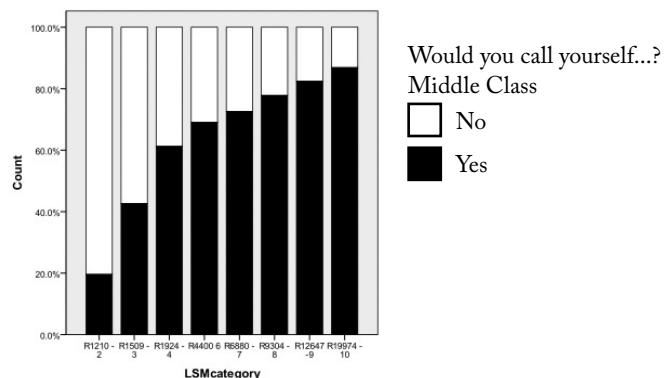
Is there something else that middle-class identifiers have in common in occupation, consumption, education or life-style?

People who accepted the labels lower class and poor were significantly more likely to be deprived on a wide range of indicators in the survey, such as the conditions of their houses and the things they owned or services they received. Their mean total LSM score is significantly lower than the rest of the population. They were more likely to be unemployed. Those lower/poors who had work were more likely to live in households with higher ratios of unemployment. They were more likely to agree with the opinions ‘we are suffering’ and ‘things were better under apartheid’, suggesting that the label is not merely a description of but also a claim for recognition of the grim circumstances summed up by the 22 year old who spends all day in a skip crushing glass to support

9 other people: his aspirations included taking himself to Nandos (a chicken fast food outlet) 'like the cheeseboys'. (Cheeseboy, a slang word widely recognized around Soweto, describes that uncomfortable social location that was of the township but a cut above it: the cheeseboy was that boy at a township school who was envied and derided because his parents could afford to slip a wedge of processed cheese into his lunchbox.)

There are fewer associations for middle-class identifiers. Those who called themselves middle and nothing else associate with no other variables except that they are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be in the youngest age ranges. People who accepted the label middle class (with or without other labels) were no more likely than the rest of the population to have secondary or tertiary education, nor to work in occupations classically understood to be middle class (like management) or historically understood as middle class in Soweto (teachers, nurses) nor to have engaged in 'middle class' activities like family holidays or barbecuing at home. They were mildly⁷ less likely to have been taken out of school before entering secondary school. Middle class identifiers were mildly more likely to call themselves happy, free and aspirational. They are mildly more likely to have certain decorations in their houses, such as tiled floors, net curtains and blompotte (mass-produced ceramic statues), and the mean overall LSM score of self-identified middles is higher than the rest of the population.

Clearly, consumption enters into how people class themselves. The trouble with leaving things at blind averages is illustrated by Graph 1 below, which shows the percentage of Sowetans in each of eight LSM categories who did and didn't accept the label middle class. The graph illustrates two things, one more obvious than the other. More obviously, there is a neat trend: the higher the LSM category (that is, the more stuff you have and services you enjoy), the greater the proportion of Sowetans in that category who think themselves middle class. Less obvious is that more than half of Sowetans in every category except the two poorest consider themselves middle, and even in the second to lowest category 4 out of 10 still consider themselves middle. Something subtler is going on here. In the last section of the paper, we will consider the multiple meanings of middle class.



Graph 1: LSM category and middle class identification

5. How Sowetans make their middle class identities

Sowetans have a vivid vocabulary of stratification used even by people who did not recognise the English word 'class'. We asked a petrol pump attendant 'what class are you?' He replied, 'I don't know what you are talking about.' Later we asked if he had a word for residents of Diepkloof Extension, the swanky area on the edge of Soweto. I heard Diepkloof Extension called emakishin' (at the kitchens), a term used during apartheid days to refer to then-white suburbs which Sowetans knew intimately only if they were domestic workers. The petrol attendant laughed and replied, this time without missing a beat: 'Oh! ama-bourgeois!'⁸.

Around 60 percent of Sowetans think there are three classes or more in Soweto and generally use some variation of an upper, a lower and a middle. This quote from our first round of interviews is a fairly typical class scheme:

I know of the low class and the middle class [in Soweto]. I am low class because I grew up in an informal settlement where there is no life.... The middle class is neither rich nor poor. It is just in the middle. These people can afford. They have houses and jobs, they have a shelter. They do not earn a lot of money, just enough for their needs. There is also a high class – those who live in suburbs [outside the township]. They can afford anything they want in life. They have houses, cars, they eat anything they like. They are educated. Their lives are smooth, for example Tony Yengeni.' (Interview, 2006) (Yengeni is a politician, notorious for posing for newspaper photographs with a shiny four wheel drive given to him by a businessman who was tendering for a government contract.)

The low-middle-upper model has persisted since Mayer's ethnographic study (Mayer, 1977; 295). Most interesting to us is Mayer's discovery that Sowetans divided the lower class into the 'dissolute' and the respectable poor who are called abantu abaphakhati – isiZulu for 'people who are in the middle' (Mayer, 1977; 100-123). We will come back to this.

Middle class identities are developed against this background. Contrary to those studies which found that declaring yourself middle class is equivalent to declaring yourself just like everyone else, our study suggests that most Sowetans who declare themselves middle class are thereby distinguishing themselves from mediocrity. Six broad themes emerge in the everyday descriptions of middle class in our study: 'affordability', self-sufficiency, support, comparison, youth culture, and language. Finally, context ties the whole story together.

'Affordability', which sounds like poor grammar to the unfamiliar, is the key concept in most Sowetans' class schemes. People use the word to encapsulate the ability to consume. Your class depends on 'the size of your pocket', as one respondent put it, and class was frequently described as a list of things possessed or lacked. Affordability was understood to also affect your bearing, confidence, dress, and other behaviour. Of course this was not the only definition of class: class was sometimes understood as a ranking

of self-worth: a cleaner insisted: 'I don't think I can call you a first class person because maybe you are wealthy, you have everything – no. To God I think someone who can keep himself or herself a human being is a first class.' A pair of cashiers visiting the Soweto Wine Festival defined class in keeping with their excursion into foreign class territory as "how you fit in. I'm middle class because I can mix with low class or high class people," and "It's not about class anyway but about how you carry yourself." Nevertheless their ability to 'pass' as middle was limited by the clothes they could afford. We handed a photo of the two around a focus group during the first phase of the research, having told the participants nothing about the women. They were labeled middle class until the photo reached a woman about the same age as the cashiers. She shook her head and declared: 'These are working class at month end'.)

Having a job confers middle class status for working people like Johan, a young man employed in the insurance industry, who said, 'I am middle class. It is because I work. I am employed.' Work brings the ability to afford things. Sabelo, a freelance tour guide at an art gallery, says his middle class identity 'started since working. I can afford. I am not rich but I can afford daily commodities. If I can put bread on the table I am middle class.'

As for Urcioli's (1995) Puerto Ricans, the ability to manage wages is important in working people's middle class identities: Jerry, a middle-aged clerk, says, 'I am in the middle class. I think I am able to control my salary. To say that with the money I am earning, I am going to do this and this... I do not overspend and I do not create for myself many credits. I check my budget, I handle that nicely.' For Hilda, the successful businesswoman, the concept plays out very differently: being middle class means 'I can afford anything that I want. I have sufficient money to afford anything that I want, no debts. Everything of mine is cash!' (our emphasis).

Affordability is linked to self-sufficiency, which in turn denotes dignity, for those with irregular income. Charles was retrenched and now supports several nephews by repairing fridges around the township:

I have been middle class for a long time, since birth because I cannot recall begging in my entire life, going around asking for handouts, money and mielie meal [maize porridge]. Even my neighbours can tell you I am not a needy person that bothers others. I can do things for myself. If I want something, I can devise a plan to get it and if I do not have money I can save up until I have enough money to buy it.

Unemployed young people who see themselves as middle, on the other hand, feel middle class because they are being supported. Johanna is unemployed except for occasional piece work. She lives with her father who works: 'No I wouldn't say I am poor, because I have bread that I am able to eat... I am still being supported'. Papo, a 24 year old law student, also mentions support: 'I am probably middle class and this is because of the opportunities I have been given which some people never get.... I wanted to go to school and I am doing exactly that – my parents paid for me.'

Comparison penetrates all these themes. People described class with a keen eye on

their neighbours: for example, a woman who sells facecloths on the street envies a worker alighting from the bus from town 'with two bags of shopping in his hands' while a shop worker describes the tycoon as the person passing by with a trolley full of groceries and car keys in hand. Comparison is particularly central to an identity understood as 'neither rich nor poor'. Abu, for example, says 'I am middle class. There are things I have that others do not have. I know of others who only studied until standard 8 and they wish to continue but they could not. Unlike them I have [completed school]' (our emphasis). Andronica says 'at least I can go to bed fed, others cannot feed themselves'. Hilda says 'when I talk of the middle class person, I talk of a person who is above low class'.

People also compare with their past: Sabelo found work and moved from a shack into a low-cost house. His middle class identity 'started since working'. Andronica says, 'I have not always been in the middle. I was struggling because there were times when my husband was working and when he was not working. So that is why I am saying I am thankful for the little I can get'.

For young people, the advancement of friends may open doors to a middle class lifestyle which those who have not 'achieved' will nevertheless perform. Disebo, who has found fulltime work, lives in two worlds: 'Just because I work I am not going to stop hanging out with [my township friends]. Then at work I have white and coloured friends ... [who will say] let's go to Newscafe at Maponya's.' (Newscafe is a chain of coffee-shop/bars associated with middle-class youth. Maponya Mall is the upmarket mall built in the heart of Soweto.) Meanwhile Louis, who is unemployed, creates and performs middle class identity through his friends: 'I go to Newscafe – friends who can afford to foot the bill, friends who have made it in life, those who have achieved everything they want in life, buy for our bill'.

Finally, although we never encountered the exact term 'abantu abaphakathi' mentioned by Meyer (1977), it helped us unpack the role of language. We wanted to interview in people's home languages but translating the word class involved using whole sentences which define the concept in advance, or asking 'where do you stand?' thus implying status rather than class (Manda and Phadi, 2010). For consistency, we decided to simply use the English word class despite the problems of doing so. Nevertheless mother-tongue concepts influence people's interpretation and representation of class concepts. People frequently used the word phakathi when talking about middle class in isiZulu, or mahareng/magareng in Sesotho or Setswana. These mean, literally, in the middle, and can be used spatially to mean inside or between, as in English. However phakathi can also be used to denote social standing: a person is in the middle if she is neither a leader nor a drunkard. A family is magareng if they are respectable. We found that people interchanged the phrase middle class with the words phakathi/mahareng/magareng as they slipped from mother tongue into English. Sowetans' descriptions of middle class, then, may be laced with these older senses of middle even when using decidedly more modern concepts like 'affordability'.

6. Conclusion: how social position shapes middle class identities.

Zusman (1985) observes that context shapes the meanings of class. Charles, having seen his neighbours beg, takes pride in his self-sufficiency and therefore is not lower. Sabelo, having moved from a shack to a brick house, becomes middle as his physical and social context changes. Affordability runs through most of these themes, but there are worlds of difference in its content: Sabelo and Andronica's putting bread on the table, Jerry's careful budgeting to work towards the things he needs and Hilda getting anything cash are all about affordability but only blind statistics or extreme insensitivity could call them the same. The material available to fill the symbolic container 'middle-class' differs according to social position.

Reference-group effects miss entirely both the way that middle class often implies dignity in the township setting and also how the scope – the field of social vision if you like – influences estimations of social location. Andronica thinks she is middle because she is comparing with people closer to her than Hilda. Like many of our waged respondents, she compares herself downwards. Calling yourself middle is a way of giving thanks 'for the little you have'. ('Some people go to bed hungry', says Gugu, an irregular worker; 'If you have eaten, say thank you.')

Hilda, however, cannot possibly be unaware of deep poverty even if she is not intimately familiar with it: she was once a nurse in a public hospital; she lives in an area overlooking a hostel (these are amongst Soweto's poorest places and the only housing type in Soweto where less than half of respondents thought themselves middle); she employs a domestic worker. Contrary to Kelley and Evans (1995), her middle class identity is not developed by comparison to friends and colleagues who are very like her, but from an awareness of poverty that is demonstrated in her assertion that 'middle class is all those who are above lower class'; she does not see herself as 'ordinary' but as explicitly above those less favoured by god. On the other hand, she knows that Diepkloof extension is rather shabby by comparison with Europe's glittering capitals because she has travelled. She concludes that she is middle by comparing herself upwards, with Maponya. Andronica, who does not leave home much because she does not work, makes a community-wide comparison; Hilda's class, which allows her greater mobility, articulates a global comparison. Middle class identities, therefore, not only reflect the material reach that social location confers, but also the width of the social view that different social locations permit.

Finally, when we presented this paper, the question we always found hardest to answer came from colleagues who share our interest in social change: what does this matter for people's attempts to change their world? Obviously, activists should be cautious about throwing around words like 'working class' to mobilize people who see themselves as 'middle class not poor', but this is nothing new. However in revisiting Hilda and Andronica's encounter, a more positive point emerges. EP Thompson (1963) liked to say

that 'The working class was present at its own birth' – people may mobilize as collectives, even along class lines, without class labels for the identities they form. Many of the class mobilizations Thompson writes about occurred before the word class appears in English.

Now, Andronica may have developed her class identity with only the haziest notion of the life of someone as 'socially distant' (Bottero, 2005; 7) from her as Hilda, but when they encounter each other in the flesh, she has no doubt that they are different classes even though she lacks the word to class Hilda. Her middle class identity cannot blind her to her broader social location in relation to Hilda. So how people identify themselves in class terms may be of secondary importance to the possibility of class conflict and mobilisation. What is wrong with the old discredited model that 'class structure leads to class consciousness leads to class action' (see Crompton 2008: 24) is not that they connect these, but that the order of things may be wrong. Other phases of our class research aim to investigate exactly whether class identity emerges from, rather than preceding, class action.

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Endnotes

1. We acknowledge that there *is* a large element of social identity which *is* 'unconscious' and not subjective, such as that which is ascribed by *others'* differentiations.
2. See Crompton (2008, P24ff, 41) and Callinicos (2006a, 182ff) on the problem with analytically collapsing structure and action
3. We define class structure broadly as *the organisation of society for exploitation*, which is by no means a purely economic process.
4. **Sampling:** We selected individuals, not households, as we were asking opinion questions. We randomly selected 2553 respondents in a three-stage sampling process.

First we obtained Statistics SA's small area layers (SALs) which delimitate Soweto into areas of roughly similar population. We compared a 2005 aerial photograph of Soweto with the aerial photograph used during the last census, to adjust the SAL list for new housing to the northwest and southeast of Soweto, and removal of some informal settlements. Given Soweto's heterogeneity, we stratified the SALs into informal settlements, well-off areas, mixed areas and hostels, based on census data about housing types, access to basic services, and ownership of goods such as computers, refrigerators and cell phones. We selected 188 SALs in a manner automatically proportionate to population size, borrowing the method described by Crankshaw, Welch and Butcher (2001). We listed all the SALs and their population sizes within the strata described. Then we created a cumulative total of population size for this whole list. We selected a random start and counted off the sampling interval from there, choosing those SALs within which the sampling interval fell. We calculated the sampling interval by dividing the total desired number of interviews by 15, the number of desired interviews per SAL, a compromise between affordability and speed, then divided the total population by the desired number of SALs to get the sampling interval.

Next, we used aerial photographs with superimposed outlines of municipal stands to randomly select 15 stands from each SAL. A stand is the municipality's term for what might otherwise be called a single property. We counted and numbered the stands, and used these numbers to select a random start. SALs are delineated

for homogeneity, so we counted off every 5th stand from the random start until 15 visiting points. In the more ordered informal settlements where no stands are marked, we counted roofs. In three cases, extremely dense and jumbled informal settlements were sampled on the ground. Hostels were sampled by the room. Substitution was only allowed if there was no residence on the selected stand, such as a shop where no-one lives. Substitution was *not* used when we could not trace a respondent. Fieldworkers were expected to make multiple visits at different times to find the selected respondent.

Fieldworkers compiled a list of people living on the stand when they came to the stand. The individual respondent was then selected from this list using a Kish grid. The Kish grid randomised gender and age and also randomised the household on stands with more than one.

Weighting: Some stands in Soweto have backyard shacks or rooms. Sometimes these backyard dwellings house separate households, sometimes they extend the main household. This is not mapped by the national census, so it's only possible to know the set-up when the fieldworker arrives at the door.

This gives each resident unequal chances of being selected (one chance in ten if you live among 9 other people, 1 in two for a nuclear family). A very simple weight extrapolates to the whole of Soweto by multiplying each respondent's answer by the number of people living on their stand. We must of course understand that, especially with questions of opinion, this is an approximation which assumes improbably that everyone on the same stand thinks the same, or more feasibly that the sampling captures the spread of opinions across stands of similar size. We ended up with 40 more interviews than intended because some fieldworkers overshot the 15-per-SAL mark. This is why there is a discrepancy between the totals below and the total selected. We kept the extras in the analysis but have proportionately reduced the weight of each questionnaire in the overshot SALs so that their total remains 15.

Our response rate is summarised here:

Response rate		Percent
Interview completed	2328	89.8
Could not trace respondent	143	5.5
Rejection	116	4.5
Partially complete	6	0.2
Total	2593	100.0

Undersampling men: Our sample undercounted men. Men were 41 percent of the respondents, women 59 percent. A follow-up survey which asked one person

- on a stand to list all the people on the stand plus their gender confirmed that this was indeed an undercount. We have not weighted for this but compensate for it by also considering men and women separately in most analysis.
5. We combined these two labels for this part of the analysis because 70 percent of respondents who accepted the 'poor' label also accepted the 'lower' label. The effect strength, which is a measure of how closely the two variables correlate, was 0.5 where 0.1 is a weak effect and 0.5 considered strong.
 6. Such as cellphones, landlines, cars, dvd players, computers, hot running water, flush toilet, domestic servants, alarm services and so on. See www.saarf.co.za for a full list of indicators.
 7. We use mildly to mean an effect strength greater than 0.1 but less than 0.2, where 0.1 is just worth mentioning while 0.5 is considered strong. It measures the strength of the association. Note that 'more likely' does not necessarily mean 'the majority of'. For example, 31 percent of people who called themselves middle had hot running water, while only 23 percent of those who did not had hot running water.
 8. In the 1970s, the term referred to a youth subculture of snappy dressers. Now it has been borrowed back into classed vocabulary to refer to the best-off Sowetans.