

## Ordinary politics: Race and opportunity in contemporary South Africa

By Ariane De Lannoy

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"I hate all forms of discrimination. No matter your colour, religion or sexual preference, we are all part of the human race. We should learn to respect one another. This respect is seriously missing today. I think our government is to blame for the outburst of our so called white students. From our tertiary institutions and schools, many of them will start a new career, but because they're a particular colour they are victimised for a crime against humanity they had no part of. Many of these people have started the same school with equal opportunities, but are now victims. Victims like so many black people experienced in the days of apartheid. Suddenly white people are at the receiving end of discrimination. I am sorry to say that laws that were put in to place to protect previously disadvantaged people are now widening the divide between our youth. I would think after 14 years it is enough."

*Anonymous, on Independent Online, 2008*

In 2008, almost 15 years into the new democratic South Africa, a series of events in the country indicated the lingering difficulties in trying to build a strong, "united" and reconciled, post-apartheid society. Incidents ranged from racist video clips by students at the University of the Free State, a racist Facebook website by students of the North-West University, to xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals in townships, and, finally, to the ousting of former President Mbeki and the formation of a new political party by a group of disgruntled ex-ANC members and leaders.

The incidents illustrate the immense complexity of the lives of South Africans – young and old, men and women, of all races – in trying to make sense of their pasts and forge identities in the present. The events and the various contradictory and heated debates – exemplified in the above quote – point at, among other things, powerful racial tensions, and a potential loss of belief in or increasing doubts about the process of social transformation and restorative justice in the country.

The incidents, in combination with findings of earlier quantitative and qualitative research\*, provided the motivation behind a new study, "Ordinary Politics: Race and Opportunity in Contemporary South Africa". The study is a collaboration between the Children's Institute and Princeton University, New Jersey, USA .

"Ordinary Politics" is an ethnographic study with six young adults, from various socio-economic and racial backgrounds, at its core, branching out to incorporate their friends, family members, (former) school mates, co-workers and others who help to shape the lives of the key informants. It aims to develop a deeper understanding into young adults' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs toward the opportunities that will – or will not – be available to them as a consequence of government policy and inter-group relations.

The detailed ethnographic material that is currently being collected will result in a narrative-style book co-authored by the principal investigators Katherine Newman (Princeton University) and Ariane De Lannoy (CI), which will exemplify the issues described through the lives of the participants.

*The project is funded by Princeton University. For more information on the study, contact [ariane.delannoy@uct.ac.za](mailto:ariane.delannoy@uct.ac.za).*

### \*See for example:

Bray R, Gooskens I, Kahn L, Moses S & Seekings J (2009) *Growing up in the New South Africa: Childhood and Adolescence in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Unpublished manuscript;

Cape Area Panel Study (2009) *About the Cape Area Panel Study*. Viewed 6 April 2009: [www.caps.uct.ac.za](http://www.caps.uct.ac.za);

De Lannoy A (2008) *Educational Decision-Making in an era of AIDS*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Sociology, UCT;

Newman K & Ehrman N (2007) *Aspirations and Experience: Race and Gender Gaps in Educational Trajectories in South Africa*. Research proposal for the development of a qualitative Cape Area Panel Study. University of Princeton & UCT.

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