

## **The Population Registration Act and Popular Understandings of Race: A case study of Sydenham**

- Vashna Jagarnath, June 2005

This paper seeks to build on Deborah Posel's<sup>1</sup> analysis of the social impact of the Population Registration Act by adding a more socially based history that takes into account the impact of this Act on the subjects of the Apartheid state. The Apartheid state sought to make race the marker of education, class, lifestyle, politics and social identity. It sought to demarcate and split society into different race groups all accessing different material realities that were prescribed to each race group. The state was not able to realise all of its goals in this regard. This paper will show some of the failures, contradictions and discrepancies of the implementation and consequences of the Population Registration Act. However one also needs to understand the way in which the act was effective. Its successes were achieved by making race a marker of social and cultural norms. These social and cultural norms in turn became the markers race setting up a mutually reinforcing social dynamic.

The long-term social consequences of the Act became deeply implicated in the articulation and development of social hierarchies. Although the ambitions of the Act were national its consequences played out in particular ways in particular geographical spaces, such as the formerly Coloured suburb of Durban, Sydenham, where this study is based. These hierarchies were closely linked to, and informed by pre-existing and newly developed forms of racial exclusion and prejudice. This was due to the convergence of official racial classification of individuals along with pre-existing but dynamic local understandings of race. The system of official racial classification converged with already existing local ideas of race that were based on family history, class, physical appearance and geography. All these components were linked to the development of individual identity and the position of that identity within particular and often interlocking social hierarchies. Although the official classification of race and local understandings of race were connected, the two components did not always compliment each other. This was the case despite the official classification and the local understandings of race being decided through the use of similar categories such as family histories, class, physicality,<sup>2</sup> and geography. These categories were nonetheless subjectively interpreted and it was these different understandings of the social components that led to the discrepancy between state imposition of a classification and local understandings of the classification. This gave rise to a complex lexicon heavily laden with localised ideas of race which informed not only where one fell within the racially informed hierarchy (as understandings of family histories, class, physicality and geography were shot through with racial anxieties and interpretations) but to an extent also determined jobs, relationships and living standards.

Through interviews with individuals within a residential area formerly classified as Coloured, Sydenham, I am able to build onto Posel's argument that relied heavily on interpretation of the bureaucracy to illustrate the difference between state rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001)

<sup>2</sup> I use the term physicality to refer to inherited physical features in a non-judgmental way.

about the Act and actual lived experience of the implementation of the Act. Sydenham provides the perfect group of people to analyse the social outcomes of the Population Registration Act as people living there were directly affected by the Act. Many of them were classified as Coloured for the first time while others maintained their racial classification of Coloured from pre-Apartheid South Africa. In both cases many people witnessed their families breaking-up either willingly, or under duress from the state, due to the classification project. Helen, an ex-seamstress who I interviewed early in the study, immediately remembered the impact of the Act on her family:

Helen: and then my brother was classified in his I.D. book as Other Coloured and my birth certificate says Mixed and my brother after me says Coloured, Earl's birth certificate says Cape Coloured, and the rest of the children says Coloured. So we don't know what happens, you tell me that was how it was then. What could we do?<sup>3</sup>

As Helen's recollection illustrates the processes of classification were often conflicting and apparently random. Posel claims this was due to the Apartheid state relying heavily on a 'commonsensical'<sup>4</sup> approach to classification. Consequently the practice of state bureaucrats was based on individual's perceptions of what constituted a racial classification, which relied heavily on subjective interpretations of family history, class, geographic location and physicality. However, when the Act was being planned the state had assumed that racial classification would be a simple matter. This assumption was well captured in a parliamentary debate in 1950:

it is obvious to all: we know that native and if we see a White man, we know that he is a White man.

We ...have never experienced any difficulties in distinguishing between Europeans and non-Europeans.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, people routinely understood their classification by the state to be inaccurate and a fairly arbitrary. In many instances people felt powerless to define themselves in the face of the authority of the subjective perceptions of local bureaucrats. Roy, a 71 year old interviewee living in Sydenham remembers how officials in the local bureaucracy<sup>6</sup> utilized their personal views on race to classify him. Roy explains that all he was required to do was to fill in a few forms. There was no discussion of any sort with the official and in fact he was never within sight of the official. His new classification was just posted to him. It was probably based on a few answers that Roy had given while filling in the forms, which had been interpreted by the official with no serious consideration of Roy's family history or geographic location.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview Helen 30 September 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in possession of researcher

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001)

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 56

<sup>6</sup> I will use the term bureaucrats and official to refer to those individuals who worked within the offices where classification or reclassification took place, namely the Home Affairs Office.

Roy: This was when the I.D. cards came out. That was when I got my birth certificate. It said Cape Coloured. I don't know how I became Cape Coloured. My elder brothers are mixed Europeans but I became Cape Coloured. This was a shock because I had never even gone to Cape Town - and I still have not been there... No you could not tell them nothing they are Afrikaners and they tell you what you were. They really played god.<sup>7</sup>

The difference between people's own understandings of racial identity and their official racial classifications is the pivot on which the analysis in this paper turns. In South Africa people were tied to their racial classification in a number of ways. This was more so after the implementation of Apartheid. Once racial classification was fixed one was tied to this identity that determined where you lived, who you engaged with, what jobs you held, where one socialized - in fact most aspects of one's life. These bureaucratic underpinnings of state imposed racism also facilitated various popular racisms.

Posel's examination of the politics of the Act shows the different ways the Apartheid state discussed the functioning of the Act as well as the different scientific discourses used to legitimate the Act.<sup>8</sup> Although the political aspects of the Act were important in the formation of the Act it was the social implications that had the more lasting effect on the development of identities. This paper will analyse the different ways individual identities within a particular, mainly residential, area were dramatically shaped through the entwinement of earlier notions of race with the Population Registration Act.

The Act enabled the crude separation of people along particular understandings of race. But it was the convergence of the Act with pre-existing and often local ideas of race<sup>9</sup> that impacted on understandings and formations of identity. These pre-existing ideas of race were often subject to, like most things local, particularities that shaped ideas according to geographic location, family history and local understandings of class and gender. So the types of influence and the ways in which pre-existing notions of race and the Act come together in Sydenham was peculiar to a certain extent but was far from completely localised as ideas and discourses may be reproduced in different geographic locations that share similar family histories, understandings of gender dynamics or belong to the same class background and so on. In the same way a different discourse of identity may develop within a few families within the same geographic location because these families either have a different understanding of class or a different family history.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview Roy 12 July 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 55

<sup>9</sup>These Acts as well as archival sources point to pre-existing understandings of race that were either official or socially constructed:

Native Beer Act in 1908

Income and Land Assessment Act of 1908

Class Areas Bill of 1919

Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR) Natal Provincial Administration (NPA) Provincial Secretary's Files Volume 152, 2/437: Director of Education to the Provincial Secretary 25-09-1942: Illegitimate Coloured Children: Admission to Coloured Schools.

## Formulation of the Population Registration Act

White racial anxieties and fears were running high during this period consequent to the increase in the urban black population in White spaces resulting from labour pressures arising from the Second World War<sup>10</sup> and increase in limits to landownership enforced on the African population meant that many people experienced hardships in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> This led to many fears being aired around the increase of visible African poverty in White urban spaces, the increase in informal settlement, a rise in crime level as well as fears of mounting political dissension.<sup>12</sup>

Europeans and non-Europeans have been working up to a crisis with more and more trouble blowing up, clashes in the towns, crimes, the creation of all sorts of hamlets on the borders of the town full of poverty and misery, clashes on the trains, assaults on women.<sup>13</sup>

These White anxieties made the segregationist policies of Apartheid proponents increasingly popular amongst the White electorate leading to the development of acts such as the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act as well as the Immorality Act. These above mentioned acts, especially the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act set up systems of governance that allowed the Apartheid state far more control over every aspect of the lives of racially segregated South Africans. This would not only entitle the state to control most aspects of individuals' lives but also to appease White anxieties about racial purity.

When the Nationalist came into power in 1948, however, a much more detailed and restrictive policy, Apartheid was out into place. In 1950 two key pieces of legislation, the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act were passed. These required that people be strictly classified by racial group, and that those classification determine where they could live and work. Other areas controlled de jure by Apartheid laws included political rights, voting, freedom of movement and settlement, property rights, rights to choose the nature of one's work, education, criminal law, social rights including the right to drink alcohol, use of public services including transport, social security, taxation, and immigration.<sup>14</sup>

If we are going to make... a clear demarcation as to who is going to be classified as European... and who is going to be classified as Coloured, then

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<sup>10</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 50

<sup>11</sup> P. Maylam & I. Edwards (ed) *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press) pg

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 52

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 52

<sup>14</sup> Bowker G. & Star S. *Sorting things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) pg 197

we must definitely take blood into consideration. It is no use saying that we know these people are Coloured. We know these people are Coloured but, because by repute and common consent they are White, we are going to make them White. By so doing, we are going to allow Coloured blood into this race which, we some of us, wish to maintain so wonderfully pure.<sup>15</sup>

The Population Registration Act of 1950 sought to do away with racial ambiguities that were present within pre-Apartheid South Africa. The proponents of the Population Registration Act felt that by creating fixed racial identities and ascribing fixed cultural practices accordingly then intimate interracial relationships would be almost impossible within South Africa.<sup>16</sup> Many suggestions and debates went into determining exactly how the state would implement this policy of classification. The Apartheid state agreed that all individuals within South Africa would be racially classified and would have a form of identity document stating their name and race. The attempt at generating a precise and state organised system of racial classification produced immediate social costs. Once a person was classified as being of a specific race their entire lives changed for better or worse. The state soon began to realise that it was almost impossible to determine people's race with confidence, and the more eugenicist methods suggested with the hope of introducing more accuracy, such as blood tests, would be too costly:

It is almost impossible to determine with any certainty which people are natives and people are Coloureds... It would be an uneconomical waste of time and money to try, throughout the country to determine a person's race with precision.<sup>17</sup>

### **Implementation of the Population Registration Act**

It was due to this realization that the putatively more scientific methods of classification were abandoned and pre-existing established methods of social readings of racial differences were implemented. So in the end the Population Registration Act made official the pre-existing methods of classification. Society and communities would judge whether an individual belonged to a particular race group. "The intention of the legislature was... that the classification of a person should be made according to the views held by members of that community."<sup>18</sup>

The reason for choosing this method was that it was believed that the race of an individual was fairly obvious and an integral part of the lived experience of all South Africans. But although there was a tacit recognition that physicality was not always able to allow obvious classification it was assumed that social identity was clear and absolute:

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 55

<sup>16</sup> Bowker G. & Star S. *Sorting things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) pg 206

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" pg 55

<sup>18</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" pg 55

A white person is one who in appearance is, or who is generally accepted as, a white person, but does not include a person who although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a Coloured person

A native is a person who is in fact or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa.

A Coloured person is a person who is not a white person nor a native.<sup>19</sup>

This excerpt from the Act as it stood in 1950 did not take into consideration the socially constructed and, at times, uncertain nature of race and therefore could not foresee the challenges that were presented to the Act by ‘passing’.<sup>20</sup> Many individuals were able to change their racial categorization by adopting the cultural norms of another race provided that the physicality of the person matched that believed to be typical of the racial classification they were assuming.

It was in trying to control the ‘passing’ of individuals from one racial group into another that the government developed and allowed ridiculous and humiliating tests to be taken by individuals whose racial classification seemed doubtful. Often times it was based on physicality such as the ‘pencil test’ that tested the texture of hair but more often it was based on racial myths and stereotypes, as well as cultural norms. These included the examining of the height of one’s bed; the language one spoke, as well the general consensus on whether an individual was part of a race.<sup>21</sup>

A pencil was pushed into the hair of the “victim” who was then told to shake his head. If the pencil fell out the person was declared “Coloured”, and if it remained, the person was declared “Native”... If you exclaimed “Ouch” when pinched, you were a “Native” but if you shouted “Eina” you were “Coloured”<sup>22</sup>

These tests based on social understandings of the period were used to try and ascertain an individual’s race. Assumptions about language, physicality and class were all used to understand which racial classification one fell under and once one was classified one’s entire material life was potentially bettered or worsened by the classification. Legislating previously social means of classification turned pre-existing signifiers of race into *de jure* racial categories that were formally worked into the legal structure of South African lives. Examples of this extended well beyond the paper work one was required to possess to include social norms such as religious practices, food and the general lifestyle that an individual was required to adhere to in order to belong to or to be reclassified racially.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Deborah Posel, “What’s in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife” pg 56

<sup>20</sup> The definition and practice of passing is discussed in detail in the introduction to the dissertation from which this paper is excerpted. Essentially ‘passing’ refers to the practice of seeking to move from one racial identity to another.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences* (Eastern Cape)

<sup>22</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences* (Eastern Cape) pg 4

<sup>23</sup> Bowker G. & Star S. *Sorting things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) pg 210

A document would have to be filled out in case of individuals requiring to be reclassified as White. Not only was the individual required to pass tests like the ones mentioned above, she or he also had to gain a sort of guarantee from another person assuring the individual's racial reclassification application is valid. Hence an individual's entire being body, mind, spirit became entwined with race as they sought to confirm and belong to a specific race group. Race therefore became, as Posel suggests, "the critical and overriding fault line: the fundamental organising principle..."<sup>24</sup>

It is therefore important to understand, analyse and document lived experiences of racial classification and the development of racial identities under Apartheid so that we can access a variety of voices about the impact of this system of governance within South Africa. It is this project of developing a more social history of classification that this paper will now turn towards.

It is evident that the Population Registration Act impacted on all South African lives to varying degrees. A particular group of South Africans that were significantly affected by this Act were those peoples' that were either previously classified racially as Coloured, or came to be classified as Coloured under the Population Registration Act. It was this part of the population that posed the biggest threat in the minds of the proponents of racial purity for the White race.<sup>25</sup>

The analysis of the social consequences of the Population Registration Act occurs on two levels. This section will begin by tackling the first level of consequence, which was the impact of the implementation of the legislation. The investigation of the implementation of the Act will also consider two levels. Firstly it will illustrate the personal effect the Act had on interviewees in Sydenham. This will begin to take us closer to intimate stories of the implications of this Act. In addition it will also illustrate that although the state had hoped for a top down implementation of the Act in fact classification developed through the dialectical interplay of popular social and legal factors.

The second half of this section will tackle the long-term impact the Act had on identity-formation in Sydenham. Through the analysis of the interviews it becomes apparent that the Act affected the formation of identity in a myriad of ways. Not only were individuals' social standing affected by the Act, but also their class, geographic location and access to job opportunities. The many factors that contributed to an individual's identity were affected by this Act. In addition this section will also illustrate the ways in which notions of race developed within Sydenham out of the convergence of the Act with local understandings of race.

One of the interesting things about the workings of the Population Registration Act was that this top-down apparatus of classification was not as efficient as many state officials hoped it would be. In fact it became more a system of classification run on 'trial and error' learning and adapting as the process progressed. As late as 1960 the

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<sup>24</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" pg 52

<sup>25</sup> Bowker G. & Star S. *Sorting things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) pg 206

act was still officially being amended to develop more clearly defined classifications.<sup>26</sup> This was especially so in areas where the large majority of the population were to be classified as Coloured or as one of the sub-categories of Coloured such as Malay, Cape Coloured and Other Coloured. This was primarily due to the state not developing workable guidelines for each of these classifications. It instead relied heavily on local ideas of particular racial categories to inform the classification process. This ran directly contrary to the hopes that the Apartheid state proponents had for this Act as it came to resemble much of the confusion that was prevalent in pre-Apartheid South Africa on issues around race:

The Government Schools in Natal provide for racial segregation, there being different schools for Europeans, Coloureds, Indians and Natives respectively.

Much trouble has been, and is being caused by Coloureds who try to gain entrance into European Government Schools but final decision has been left in the hands of the District Inspectors who, with the assistance of Attendance Officers, can make investigations.

While this approximation of Coloured to White gives trouble at one end of the scale, one of the District Inspectors has found new trouble at the other end. He has seen in Coloured Schools children who to all intents Natives in appearance and upbringing.<sup>27</sup>

The contradiction between the State's desire for rigorous and effective implementation of the Act<sup>28</sup>, and the actual implementation of the Act is apparent in the excerpts to follow. Many of the issues around racial classification to be discussed were very similar to the dilemmas illustrated in the excerpt from the above letter on admissions into schools.

### **Sydenham and the Population Registration Act**

Sydenham under Apartheid was designated as a Coloured residential area yet of my eighteen interviewees only four were officially classified as Coloured. Five of my interviewees were classified as Cape Coloured, three as mixed race, four as Other Coloured and two as Malay. Despite this difference in racial categories all my interviewees continued to live in Sydenham during Apartheid. This was so even in instances when the very definition of a racial classification tied one to a geographic space, as was with the case of the racial classification of Malay. To be classified as Malay one had to live only in the area of Schotsche Kloof in the Cape. If a person classified as Malay was to move out of this area they would be reclassified as Coloured.<sup>29</sup> This official definition of the term Malay did not hinder many in local Durban bureaucracies from classifying individuals as Malay.

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<sup>26</sup> W. B. Vosloo, "The Coloured Policy of the National Party" in N.J. Roodie (ed) South African Dialogue (South Africa: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972) pg 364

<sup>27</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR) Natal Provincial Administration (NPA) Provincial Secretary's Files Volume 152, 2/437: Superintendent of Education to legal adviser 09-03-38: Admissions of Pupils to Schools

<sup>28</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001)



Shirley: Oh! Ja I remember both my father and my brother were classified as Malay. I think it was because we are Muslim, they thought we must be Malay.<sup>30</sup>

This form of the classificatory process was in stark contrasts to Apartheid proponents' desires to keep people in racially segregated areas.

The sub-committee reported firmly in favour of residential segregation, the necessity for this arising 'primarily from the desire of persons of the same group to live in the same neighbourhoods.'<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly this quote reveals another instance of the inherent tension, noted earlier in this paper, between the assumption that race was a neatly bordered extant social reality and that legislative precision with regard to race could be founded on popular understandings of race. The tension is inherent both because if this were so the legal project would be redundant in certain aspects and because there was a degree to which popular understandings of race were local, dynamic and imprecise. This was particularly so with regard to Coloured identities.

Multiple classifications within one family living within the same residential area was not the only possibility that the Act did not close completely. Many other gaps in racial understandings and classifications that the Act's proponents hoped it would close off remained opened to a certain extent and many individuals were successful in 'passing'. In fact many individuals kept living in areas racially classified as different to their own racial classification. In Sydenham many interviewees remember either vouching for an individual's race so that they could continue living in Sydenham or choosing to be re-classified as Coloured in order to remain in Sydenham. Sophie, a 68 year old housewife remembers with smug satisfaction how her family were able to dupe a state official:

Sophie: I know an Indian chap who asked us to vouch for him and say that he was Coloured, and he was classified as Coloured and then he just lived here in Sydenham. He lived here all his life how did they expect to go and live amongst the Indians.<sup>32</sup>

Tanya, an elderly woman who used to work at a hat factory, recalls her family's decision not to choose to be classified as White:

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<sup>29</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences* (Eastern Cape) pg 7

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee Shirley 3 September 2002 Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>31</sup> P. Maylam & I. Edwards (ed) *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press) pg 22

<sup>32</sup> Interview Sophie 4 February 2003 Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

Tanya: My family was White but choose to be Coloured because we lived in areas that were Coloured and went to Coloured schools so what were we going to do with the White man now.<sup>33</sup>

It seemed much easier for Sophie's friends and Tanya's family to determine what racial classification they wanted and, therefore, the place where they lived than it was for other families. The process of classification was often a long and difficult process with exceptionally high stakes and, for many, no guarantee of the hoped for outcome. In addition the process of classification was so deeply entrenched in social ideas of race such as physicality, family history, class, speech and language that an individual's entire lifestyle was wrapped up in this process of classification. Once one was classified her or his classification was always under scrutiny, not only by the government but by other individuals in the community. This was often a process rather than an event as many people sought to be re-classified:

The Survey of Race Relations by the South African Institute of Race Relations, annually printed a list of persons who applied to the Race Classification Board for reclassification.<sup>34</sup>

Given White anxieties about racial purity the annual production of this list effectively marked out individuals and families as threats to the project of racial separateness and the racial hierarchy that produced a material hierarchy. This form of state sanctioned racial mobility extended beyond those individuals whose names were produced every year on the list but included many individuals and families who did not comply with the contemporary socially accepted understandings of race, whether it was African, Coloured, Indian or White. These local understandings of race, fostered by state rhetoric and ideas of race, impacted greatly understandings and formations of identity. They also, *crucially*, created local hierarchies deeply informed by ideas about race within one racial classification as well imprinting upon many South Africans' minds particular notions of race and racial discriminations that still exist presently. This is evident in a national 2001 survey by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation that found that racial reasoning remained pervasive after the removal of the legislation enabling legal classification:

According to the survey, several of the markers of a strong sense of racial distance are more prominent among Africans than Whites. For example, 56 per cent of Africans, 33.4 per cent of Whites, 26.6 per cent of Coloureds and 41.6 per cent of Indians perceived people of other races to be untrustworthy. And 52.7 per cent of Africans found it 'hard to imagine ever being friends' with people of other races, along with 18.5 per cent of Whites, 12.8 per cent of Coloureds and 19.2 per cent of Indians. 46.9 per cent of Africans said that they felt 'uncomfortable around people of other races', as did 34.7 per cent of Whites, 24.3 per cent of Coloureds and 36.7 per cent of Indians.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interview Tanya 3 June 2003 Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>34</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences* (Eastern Cape) pg 11

<sup>35</sup> Deborah Posel, "What's in a name? Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife" *Transformation* 47 (2001) pg 50

The long-term effect of popular and state organised racial classification is still very much present in a place such as Sydenham. It animates most aspects of interviewees' lives from their place in the local social hierarchy, relationships both familial and friendships as well as class. Much of the rhetoric used to justify the local social hierarchy is based on racial ideas that were either state sanctioned or local in origin. These local ideas around race tend to utilise the official criteria for classification - such as family history, class, geography and physicality - but they are often interpreted differently in the local context. Often local knowledge of family history, geography and beauty are used to make a decision on a person's place in the social hierarchy of Sydenham. This may often be in agreement with the individual's official racial classification but it also happens that individuals end up accessing a social status that the state did not envision.

One of the main criteria informing official racial classification was the physical appearance of individuals. Physical appearance is also one of the main criteria informing social hierarchies in Sydenham. As discussed earlier the state developed a whole range of tests to determine the racial classification of individuals in which physical appearance was vital although not always decisive. The tests not only examined the texture of an individual's hair but also bodily and facial features.<sup>36</sup> The state's emphasis on physicality was not lost on the subjects of the Apartheid state who understood very well the weight their body shape and size played in determining their racial classification. The fear that one might be classified as African weighed heavily on many individuals as many wished to remain or to be re-classified as Coloured. Being Coloured in Apartheid South Africa afforded one more rights than Africans or Indians as people who were classified as Coloured were just below Whites on the official racial hierarchy.<sup>37</sup> These rights included the Coloured Labour Preference Policy in the Cape and relatively privileged access to education and opportunities for training and employment as artisans. Many people urgently sought to avoid classification as African as this meant that the material consequences of an individual would be drastically affected as the racial classification of African was the lowest in the official racial hierarchy both in terms of material and social benefits. The social stigmas attached to being African under Apartheid were often expressed by interviewees in Sydenham. It not only meant that one's racial classification was precariously placed but that one experienced social discrimination within Sydenham.

This social hierarchy around physicality fostered anxieties amongst a group of people who were aware that the state emphasized the physicality of racial characteristics in racial classification. People became aware of its importance through their own classification and the classification of others whom they knew. Among people whose broad racial classification was Coloured reference to physicality became a very significant means of social description and differentiation.

This was a process that was influenced and made easier by the fact that the classification Coloured was never really absolute. R.H. du Pres describes at length the

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<sup>36</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences (Eastern Cape)* pg 8

<sup>37</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences (Eastern Cape)* pg 20-21

uncertainty of what constituted 'Coloured' due to the constant "process of legislative distillation".<sup>38</sup>

The precariousness of the category of Coloured fed into the anxieties of people who were classified as Coloured as there were fears that they or members of their family could be reclassified as African or Indian given the persisting legislative uncertainty around Coloured classification. This meant that racial readings of physicality informed individuals' social standing, class, relationships and notions of beauty. This becomes evident in a conversation with a group of church ladies in Sydenham who were at any point in the discussion either describing a person's physicality in terms of racial characteristics or referring to people through particular understandings of the physicality of racial characteristics.

Helen: That could be when they could have brought those people in that we call the Bojangs from Cape Town.

Interviewer: Who are the Bojangs from Cape Town?

Helen: Like my granny would say the "regte Boesman" (the proper Bushmen) they definitely weren't our class. They didn't have the right hair, and their cheekbones were high and things like that.

Interviewer: Were having the right looks important?

Helen: What do you mean, of course it was important. You see if you had straight hair, fair skin, light eyes and dressed well then you were considered better than the rest.

Carol: Ja! Then you were absolutely accepted and you were up there

Helen: Like let me give you an example, like I worked at the slipper factory at that time it was the fair people with straight hair that got certain jobs at the factory as well as at the hat factory and the Lion Match factory. You got the sort of fair Coloureds with straight hair working in those types of jobs.

Interviewer: Were these jobs better paid or just considered better because they were easier?

Helen: Oh! You were better paid. You got five rand sixty a week.

Carol: You see other ladies worked at the depot those women you know that did not look as nice, they looked more African. They used to wipe the tins and put label onto them. They got paid five rand.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of one's physicality was not only important in determining one's official racial classification but once one was classified it determined your social identity within the specific racial classification. The comments and prejudices about certain individuals classified as Coloured which are often expressed in Sydenham may not be the same in different parts of South Africa or even Durban. The readings of physicality based on race are at times particular to Sydenham due to the specific make up of the population of Sydenham in terms of class, family histories and interpretations and experiences with the process of classification. All of these factors went into producing certain local understandings of race.

In terms of class Sydenham was considered a better area than other residential areas designated as Coloured, like Wentworth, as it had better housing facilities and social

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<sup>38</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, *Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences (Eastern Cape)* pg 19

<sup>39</sup> Interview Helen and Carol 4 September 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

amenities.<sup>40</sup> The idea that Sydenham was a better area than other areas classified as Coloured was definitely picked up upon by the people living in Sydenham. They felt that they were of a “better class than other Coloureds”<sup>41</sup> and since class was closely linked to physicality many individuals who did not fit into the accepted notions of physicality were discriminated against, both socially and, to an extent, in their jobs.<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth and Helen give a good illustration of the discrimination in Sydenham towards people coming from other areas such as Kokstad in which the population classified as Coloured tended to look more African:

Elizabeth: Oh! It was always upsetting when these farm Coloureds moved into Sydenham. We really didn't want them here but the government would just shove them anywhere they did not realise we were different Coloureds.

Interviewer: What do you mean by farm Coloureds?

Elizabeth: You know the one's that are close to Africans. They grow up in farms live with the Zulus and have Zulu grandparents and so on.

Helen: Ja! But we warned our kids and made sure they never married any of them. We could not have any of those farm Coloureds in our family. What would happen to our grandchildren? Their lives would be bad because people will say they have African blood.

Elizabeth: You see it is not that we have anything against Africans its just that we don't want our kids or grandchildren suffering like the Africans do.<sup>43</sup>

Once again the perceived loss of material and social benefits are closely linked to the anxieties around race. In this instance racial anxieties often conformed more closely to the logic of the larger project of the Apartheid state's racial hierarchies than to the local realities produced by its attempts to legislate its broad racial project because people moving in from places like Kokstad were often not poor like most rural Africans and had, in fact, been able to utilise their classification as Coloured to become artisans. The anxieties projected onto these people were due to their physicality rather than their actual class but the broad anxieties around physicality was linked to broader conjunctions between race, usually understood to be a physical reality, and class.

Members of families that were interviewed often claimed that they were able to preserve their own family's social standing by exercising control and sanction over their children's choice in intimate relationships or marriage.

Roy: How do you think we still look like this, all my children still have straight hair, light eyes and nice noses. That's because I married her (he points to his wife). I did not only marry her for the way she looked but then again I would not have married a farm Coloured I know better than that. And

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<sup>40</sup> This has been discussed at great length in chapter one.

<sup>41</sup> Interview Carol 4 September 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>42</sup> See interview excerpt above

<sup>43</sup> Interview Helen and Elizabeth 4 September 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

you know what so do my kids. They won't just marry anyone. They will marry a Coloured like us.<sup>44</sup>

Often interviewees claim that they could easily control and police the children's choices in marriage and at other times there was no need for them to even exert control. Many of the young people in Sydenham had already internalised the acceptable standards of physicality that would retain or cement social standing. Those who did not meet the acceptable physical criteria either completely rejected the social hierarchy and tried to inhabit different spaces or were subject to some of the most stressful and constraining efforts to change physical appearance.

Jasmine: Oh! You know my poor grandchild she has to wear those phutu plaits. My son went of and married a farm Coloured and I had nothing against it, but now my grandchild has to suffer. She knows she is different, all her cousins have straight hair and she doesn't. So she wants her mother to makes this hairstyle so that her hair might start growing and she can straighten it.

Interviewer: What are phutu plaits?

Jasmine: You know those tight hairstyles. They pull all you hair back even if your hair is short and plait them to stretch them. You know it pulls your hair and makes it longer.<sup>45</sup>

But not everyone tried to conform to the acceptable standards of physicality in Sydenham. Many individuals were, and increasingly are, becoming more comfortable with having curly hair, darker skin and obvious African ancestry. Although these individuals are not always accepted within certain circles in Sydenham, and are often commented upon by church ladies on Sunday, they are however accepted and comfortable in other circles. The fact that this is increasingly so is probably due to some of the breakdown in prejudicial racialisation of physicality in South African. Shirley makes this point clearly but without sympathy:

Shirley: These women just don't care. They just wear their hair natural. At least a few years ago they had the decency to wear a scarf or roller and come to church. You see it has become more acceptable with the blacks in power now and they think they are so great because the black man is in power, but we know their stink.<sup>46</sup>

Although it seems this racialised hierarchy is so prevalent within Sydenham it does not necessarily extend to include individuals who are actually racially classified into a different race group. This becomes clear in an interview carried out with a group of church ladies that ranged between the ages of 59 and 73. These women spent many hours setting up feeding schemes for nearby informal settlements in which the population is mainly African. These women are very kind and well meaning in these efforts to offer solidarity to residents in the informal settlements and are often raising funds to increase their feeding scheme. However this generosity does not extend to individuals within the Coloured community who are lower down on the social

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<sup>44</sup> Interview Roy 12 July 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>45</sup> Interview Jasmine 7 December 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>46</sup> Interviewee Shirley 3 September 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

hierarchy and are often in desperate need as well. These women are still contemptuous of these individuals who were classified as Coloured, but who were and are still ostracized for their lower social standing. This is an example of how the historical processes of racial classification still informs racialized social hierarchies today.

Carol: When I say these people are uncouth this is what I mean. Now take for example the feeding we do. It is only for the Blacks in the informal settlement but these Coloureds, the ones that have come to live in Sydenham Heights, the one from the farms, well they just come there and take all the food. I mean it is not for them. They don't need our help, they are lazy, they take drugs and they have no manners.<sup>47</sup>

It seems that in many instances the high level of racialized prejudice that exists within Sydenham extended mainly to individuals that were classified as Coloured. This was probably due to the anxieties around the actual definition of the classification Coloured. Due to the precariousness of the classification Coloured, and the fear of re-classification into a racial category lower down on the racial hierarchy, many individuals began to set up some boundaries that would better define in their minds what it meant to be Coloured. One of the main criteria used in the definition was physicality. This was similar to state criteria of classification. However many individuals within Sydenham had, if not a more strict, then certainly a different, reading of physicality. These strict ideas of acceptable standards of physicality meant that the number of people that actually came to be seen as 'acceptable' Coloureds within the social hierarchy of Sydenham was less than those deemed Coloured by the state. For example a fair skinned individual with curly hair would be classified by the state as Coloured but within the social hierarchy of Sydenham this person maybe discriminated against due to the texture of their hair. This meant that groups of individuals living within in Sydenham maybe officially classified as Coloured but still be open to another level of discrimination based on local ideas of physical acceptability.

It was not only physical acceptability that was important. Conversation often turned to an individual's family history. Although an individual may be accepted on the basis of their physicality they would have to also come from a family that shares the same physical characteristics. There were many anxieties expressed by individuals that a certain feature such as hair texture or the shape of the nose maybe inherited from a family member that did not fit the acceptable standards of physicality. Therefore conversations around an individual's family history are often heavily loaded. Violet, who works at Clicks, brings this out clearly:

Violet: You never know with that throwback gene it can be strong. You may get two generations of people looking fine and then your grandchild comes out with twisted hair. So you always have to watch the family and see who they bring out from the woodwork.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Interviewee Carol 4 September 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

<sup>48</sup> Interview Violet 13 October 2002, Sydenham: Durban. Transcripts in the possession of the researcher

The uncertain legislative definition of the term Coloured led to many anxieties developing around this racial classification. Individuals were never certain about where the boundaries of being Coloured began or ended and with legislation constantly changing many individual feared that they, or members of their family would be re-classified. So within this uncertain classification individuals began to develop a more certain classification to define themselves apart from individuals that maybe re-classified. This gave rise to the idea that certain individuals were ‘proper Coloureds’<sup>49</sup>. Those that did not fit this category were usually individuals that could more easily be re-classified and, more importantly, be re-classified as African. People in Sydenham were placed in a local social hierarchy in accordance with how they fitted into local ideas of what it was to be ‘properly’ Coloured. In order to understand an individual or family’s place and determine whether they were ‘properly Coloured’ or not a criteria developed that was similar to the criteria used by the official classification process. However the criteria of physicality, family history and class were open to new interpretations. As illustrated so far these interpretations were based on local understandings of physicality, local knowledge of family history and class. This in effect created a local definition and system of policing that was influenced by the state. It, however, tended to work mostly outside the local official classificatory bureaucracy. Therefore many individuals, both those interviewed and those discussed in interviews, within Sydenham went through two processes of racial defining one official and one social.

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<sup>49</sup> Dr. R.H. du Pré, Race Classification in South Africa, 1948-1994: Implementation, Implications and consequences (Eastern Cape) pg 7