Abstract

The corporate middle class, or managers, occupies a contradictory class location in capitalist relations of production. While they do not own the means of production, this class stratum is not exploited like the working class. This class position, however, is bound to be different for a black manager whose advancement in the workplace may be due to government attempts to economically empower black people to redress the injustices imposed by the racially dominated social structure of the past. Through a Weberian understanding of social stratification as based on class, social status and power, this research aims to unearth how members of the African corporate middle class understand their position and roles in South African workplaces and communities. It also goes deeper to scrutinise the impact of this structural position on their agency. It is shown that their contradictory class location is exacerbated by their race.

African managers constantly negotiate their positions and roles in their workplaces and communities. Indeed, while their managerial position affords them spaces that they could not have occupied during the apartheid era, their racial character lessens their ability to manoeuvre within these spaces. This can be identified both in workplaces and communities. It is shown that their middle-class status cannot be consolidated because of their perceived lower social status and less power to influence decision making in their organisations. Furthermore, it is shown that, although not all of the interviewees moved to middle-class areas, there is an indication of alienation in previously white-only residential areas. This is further exacerbated by expectations from their former communities and members of their extended families. As a result of high levels of unemployment in African communities, members of this group are actively contributing to uplift members of their extended families.