

Ordinary Politics: Race and Opportunity in Contemporary South Africa



A longitudinal, ethnographic study to understand young adults' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs toward the future opportunities that will – or will not – be available to them in South Africa

The project is a collaboration with social scientist Katherine Newman – the former director of the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, and current Dean at the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, John's Hopkins University, USA.

The study originated from a shared interest in the topic after analysis of Cape Area Panel Study data, and after events in South Africa in 2008 that indicated racial tensions and a potential loss of belief in, or increasing doubts about, the process of social transformation in the country.

In an effort to understand the dynamics behind these developments, the project followed six young adults – men and women from various socio-economic and racial backgrounds – in their daily lives. Many hours of interview material were collected, while observational work focused on the youth's social worlds, work environments and (extended) families. In this way, the study branched out from the six core participants to include interviews with their friends, family members, (former) school mates, co-workers, employers and others who shape their lives.

Through the interviews, the study probed, among others, participants' perceptions of past and present "political histories", their memories and understandings of the apartheid era, the transition to democracy, and the contemporary state of the country's political system. Part of the research took place at the time of the 2009 elections, for example, and participants were queried extensively on their trust in political parties, the state of race relations, and the election results. Other interview topics ranged from family histories, trajectories of employment or unemployment, to "community forces" shaping young adults' everyday lives (gang life, alcoholism, violence, jealousy, but also support, encouragement, role models, beliefs, aspired places, ...).

Fieldwork was wrapped up in early 2010. Analysis and writing had begun, and final interviews with participants were scheduled for early 2011. The research results will be published in a narrative-style book, co-authored by the principal investigators.

The project is funded by Princeton University.