

**Racial (re)classification during apartheid South Africa:
Regulations, experiences and the meaning(s) of 'race'**

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Abstract

The Population Registration Act (No. 30 of 1950) laid down the procedures for classifying and reclassifying the South African population into three main racial groups: “White”; “Native” (renamed “Bantu” then “Black”); and “Coloured” (later subdivided into seven subgroups: “Cape Coloured”; “Malay”; “Griqua”; “Chinese”; “Indian”; “Other Asiatic”; and “Other Coloured”), using three classificatory criteria: appearance; acceptance; and descent. This thesis examined the development and implementation of racial (re)classification and what this might reveal about the meanings of race during apartheid. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were used to analyse primary and secondary data, including: official statistics; documentary material; and interviews. The thesis reached three main conclusions. First, race was not operationalised consistently over the forty years the Act was in place. Instead, three distinct phases were evident in very different rates of reclassification: variable rates from 1950 to 1967; low and relatively stable rates between 1968 and 1979; and substantially elevated rates during the 1980s. These three phases could be mapped to changes in legislation affecting the definitions of the racial groups and the (re)classification procedures, and in some cases to the political context during each phase. The second conclusion was that race was not operationalised consistently by each of the actors (State, legislature and individual classifiers) and tribunals (Race Classification Boards and the Supreme Courts) involved. The government became increasingly concerned with its ability to enforce race classifications, and the Boards applied a raft of strategies to discredit objections to (re)classification. In contrast, the Courts adopted a more even-handed approach and often challenged the government’s and Boards’ (re)classificatory procedures and decisions. Finally, the documentary evidence and interviews with those involved with racial (re)classification found that race was informed more by commonsense than by scientific principles, although no *common* commonsense existed and race therefore had a range of different meanings.

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