ENCOUNTERS WITH RACE: ERITREAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS’ SELF-IDENTIFICATION PRACTICES IN RELATION TO THE EXPERIENCE OF RACIALISATION IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Amanuel Isak Tewolde

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Supervisor:
Dr Irma du Plessis
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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.
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This thesis is dedicated to all forced migrants across the world.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HRW: Human Rights Watch
IPA: interpretative phenomenological analysis
UN: United Nations
UN DATA: United Nations Data
UNHCR: United Nations High Commission for Refugees
ABSTRACT

Little is known about the everyday racialisation experiences and self-identification practices of foreign-born non-South African communities in South Africa such as refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants. To explore this everyday phenomenon, I employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach and interviewed 46 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers living in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. This study is embedded in the field of race, ethnicity and immigration studies. Racialisation theory, racial and ethnic identity theories, and immigrant adaptation theories were employed to interpret the findings. Results indicate that most participants largely resisted and challenged their racialisation by both bureaucratic forms and local South Africans in their everyday social interactions. Participants were racially perceived and classified by ordinary South Africans, as coloured, indian, alternately as coloured and indian, black, and as racially ambiguous. Some viewed racial identities as meaningless categories. Others self-identified ethnically in a contextually contingent and dynamic ways as Eritreans, Habesha and Tigrinya. Still others racially self-identified as black, and as coloured. Through their complex and novel practices of racial self-identification patterns, the participants re-defined traditional racial self-identification practices in South Africa. For some, skin colour and phenotype did not inform their racial self-identification and the majority inconsistently moved between racial categories depending on the social context and in complex ways. The participants’ experiences suggest that traditional South African racial categories are encountering resistance and re-definition by foreign-born refugee and asylum-seeker communities; furthermore, such communities are introducing new ways of racial self-identification practices in everyday life in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Key words: asylum-seekers, Eritrea, ethnicity, ethnic self-identification, interpretative phenomenological analysis, post-Apartheid, race, racialisation, racial self-identification, South Africa
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study, conceived in the interpretative phenomenological tradition of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), explores how Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers, in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town, experience imposed racial classification (both bureaucratically and in everyday social interactions), give meaning to these racialisation experiences, and how their sense of self-identification in their everyday lives is shaped by such imposed racialisation. ‘Race’ and the practice of racial categorisation is an important and controversial topic in contemporary South Africa; however, little is known about how non-South Africans, such as refugees and asylum-seekers experience racial classification in post-Apartheid South Africa; what racial classification means to them; and their adjustment to South African racial self-identification practices in everyday life. Few studies have explored the phenomenon of racialisation from the perspective of individuals and groups who were not familiar with South African racial categorization and racial self-identification practices. In this study, Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers provide their perspectives on their experiences of racial categorisation in everyday life, both on bureaucratic forms and by ordinary South Africans in social encounters. The participants also recount the meanings they associated with being racialised and the extent to which their experiences of imposed racialisation influenced how they adapted to the South African racial self-identification system. My participants comprised persons in my existing network, acquaintances, and people I did not know whom I recruited through snow-ball sampling. My position as an insider, who shared a similar ethno-linguistic background as well as everyday racialisation experiences in South Africa, allowed for a hermeneutic process of mutual sense-making. That is, such insider positionality provided a productive field for understanding my participants’ inner world. Hermeneutics is an approach central to IPA, and was hugely helpful in making sense of the nuances of my participants’ interpretations of their racialisation experiences. My insider positionality also posed a challenge as I might have been predisposed to approach the study with my assumptions and biases.

1 Racialisation can be defined as the practice of assigning racial identities to persons living in race-conscious socio-cultural contexts (Omi and Winant 1994: 14).
2 I have placed the word ‘race’ in inverted commas, at first mention, to denote that it is a social construct. For legibility, I have removed the inverted commas in subsequent usage of the term.
3 In post-Apartheid South Africa, Apartheid-era racial categories continued to be utilised, under the Employment Equity Act of 1998 of the South African Constitution, to redress structural past racial inequalities, and for statistics.
Why I Embarked on this Study

When I first entered South Africa as an Eritrean asylum-seeker, I was not aware of my racial identity. My first encounter with racialisation occurred at a shelter for the homeless in Johannesburg where I was staying (I was homeless for some time). One of the staff at the shelter one day asked me, ‘Are you coloured? I was confused by his question as I was not yet familiar with self-identifying myself in terms of racial categories found in my new home, South Africa. ‘I don’t know, but I am Eritrean.’ was my response. His reply was, ‘But, you look coloured’. Back in Eritrea, people used to describe me as (in Tigrinya) ‘እቲ ካይሕ መድ፣ ‘itti keyih wedi’ (‘the red guy’) due to my fair skin colour. Beyond that my skin colour and physical appearance did not have a racial connotation as there are no racial categories in Eritrea. In South Africa, the experience of being perceived and classified racially continued and now my survival struggle was complicated by my struggle to learn to self-identify in terms of racial identity categories I encountered in South Africa. In everyday life, most of the time, people see me as coloured, and very occasionally as indian. I always struggle in which racial category to locate myself. But, when it comes to checking a box on official forms I select black in order to benefit from self-identifying as black, to be eligible for affirmative action. Over time, from talking to my fellow Eritreans in South Africa, I came to realise that I was not the only one experiencing racial classification by ordinary South Africans; other Eritreans also experienced similar encounters. Before the conceptualisation of this research study, during my frequent visits to different South African cities, to see friends and acquaintances, we would chat about our experiences of being misidentified as black, coloured, or indian. What became salient in our informal conversations was that most of the Eritreans I had a conversation with disclosed that they encountered racial categorisation by both institutional forms and ordinary South Africans in their everyday life. For example, some of those who lived in Durban would tell me that due to their phenotype, people always mistook them for South African indians; while some of those in Cape Town told me that, people perceived them as coloured. Eventually, I decided to turn such everyday racialisation experiences into a fully-fledged research project for my doctoral study.

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4 All South African racial labels, namely black, white, coloured and indian are put in lower case throughout, and I have not placed them in inverted commas for legibility. I am aware that the categories are socio-historically constructed.
Research Context

Historically, the emigration of people from Eritrea, a country located in North East Africa, from their country of origin and the creation of the Eritrean Diaspora in different countries can be traced to the war for independence in the 1960s against Ethiopia (Kibreab 2000: 260-263; Conrad 2006: 24; Thiollet 2007). Since most military confrontations between the Eritrean liberation movement forces and the Ethiopian troops took place around villages and towns, such wars accelerated the displacement of thousands of Eritreans and their exodus into neighbouring countries, particularly to Sudan (Kibreab 2000: 253). There were tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees who left their homes behind to become encamped refugees in Sudan in the 1960s and 70s (Kibreab 2000: 252). Particularly from mid 1970s, large numbers of Eritrean refugees found themselves in Sudanese refugee camps and some cities, and their resettlement to different Western countries became a common experience and even continued until the independence of Eritrea in 1991 (Kibreab 2000: 253). For example, in the 1980s over a million Eritrean refugees fled the country and the emigration trend continued into the 1990s (Thiollet 2007: 2). In the early 1990s, one-third of the Eritrean population lived in the diaspora (Thiollet 2007: 2). The Eritrean diaspora communities were initially located in African countries such as Sudan and the Middle East such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen and a relatively negligible number started settling in Western countries such as Europe and North America (Thiollet 2007: 2). During this period, Eritreans belonging to the various ethno-linguistic groups were forced to emigrate. I have not found statistical data that documented emigration patterns of Eritreans based on their ethno-linguistic membership.

After independence, in 1991, former Eritrean refugees and exiles started returning home and the out-migration of Eritreans subsided (Conrad 2006: 1). However, according to Conrad (2006: 2), as a result of the border war that erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia from 1998-2000, large numbers of Eritreans, especially those who lived along the border towns and villages, fled the new war again. Even if the border war had ended in 2000, the wave of Eritreans fleeing the country had not stopped (Conrad 2006:2). The resurgence of Eritreans crossing borders to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, such as Sudan and Ethiopia can be linked to human rights violations perpetrated by the post-independence Eritrean government (Treiber 2009: 4; Hepner 2015: 188-194; Human Rights Watch 2015; Belloni 2016: 105-109).

In 2015, Eritrea was described by the UNHCR as one of the top refugee-producing countries, with 352,309 refugees and 60,157 asylum-seekers living in different host countries.
In 2015, Ethiopia hosted the largest number of Eritrean refugees, around 139,300 (UNHCR 2015: 7).

According to Human Rights Watch (2015), Hepner (2015: 188-194) and Belloni (2016: 105-109), thousands of Eritreans flee the country each month because of deteriorating human rights conditions in Eritrea, including arbitrary arrests, detentions, disappearances and most importantly, indefinite military conscription. According to the estimates of the United Nations Commission for Refugees (cited in HRW 2015 report), during 2015, 4,000 Eritreans fled the country on a monthly basis, South Africa being one of their destination countries.

The first Eritreans who immigrated to South Africa were hundreds of former University of Asmara graduates who were sent on a study visa by the Eritrean government to pursue their postgraduate degrees from 1999 until 2001 (Hepner 2015: 196). Ever since, Eritreans continued to enter South Africa. It is difficult to establish the precise number of Eritreans belonging to the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group as the South African Department of Home Affairs keeps statistics on country of origin of asylum-seekers and refugees rather than one’s ethnicity within one’s country of origin. Based on my extensive and frequent contact with Eritreans in the major South African cities (Pretoria, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Durban) and from talking to many of those who came to South Africa as part of those who were dispatched to study, the majority were of a Tigrinya ethnicity (a politically, culturally, economically and socially dominant ethnic group in Eritrea). Such disproportionality illustrates how educational opportunities are distributed unevenly to members of the Tigrinya ethnicity who benefit from further education opportunities overseas. Furthermore, most Eritrean communities in various parts of the abovementioned major cities are dominated by members of the Tigrinya ethnicity. In 2004, there was only one recognised refugee from Eritrea in South Africa; however, by the year 2012, the number of Eritrean refugees stood at 660 refugees (UN 2013). By 2013, there were 821 recognised Eritrean refugees in South Africa (UNDATA 2014). Presently, the number continues to increase as the human rights condition in Eritrea worsens and is facilitated by the social networks of the Eritrean refugee communities already established in the country.

The preponderance of Eritreans in South Africa and receiving countries in North America and Europe, particularly after the deterioration of human rights in Eritrea, speaks to their expansive social network of family members, relatives, friends belonging to the Tigrinya ethnicity that are established in countries of destination. Such network provides them with easy access to finances and information that facilitate their exit from Eritrea (by
way of paying for human smugglers to both Sudan and Ethiopia) and their onward journeys to destination countries.

The settlement of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa was made possible due to an open asylum policy of the post-Apartheid state. Since 1994, and with the liberalisation of immigration by the post-Apartheid government policy, South Africa has seen a significant increase in the number of asylum-seekers and refugees. By mid-2015, South Africa had 114,512 refugees (UNHCR 2015: 18). In the same year, South Africa had the largest number of asylum-seekers, an estimated 798,100 applications followed by Germany (UNHCR 2015: 13).

Based on my personal knowledge of the Eritrean community, Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers live predominantly in the major South African cities such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth and some live in smaller towns. The majority of Eritreans in South Africa earn a living by operating clothing and grocery shops. Some work in the private and government sectors while others are university students.

In contrast to their country of origin from which they fled, Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers find themselves in a country where they have, among others, the right to free speech, the right to movement and the right to study and work (Crush 2001: 104; Hepner 2013: 194). Despite such rights, however, Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers also live in an environment where xenophobia is rampant (Crush 2001: 109; Landau 2010: 217; Chinomona & Maziriri 2015: 23; Hepner 2015: 186). In addition to that, Eritreans in South Africa also find themselves in a socio-economic environment where there is high unemployment rate and a wide rift between the rich and the poor with the majority of black South Africans still at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder (Crush 2001: 117; Seekings 2008: 9-11; Greyling 2016: 234).

**Background to the Research Problem**

Scholarship on racialisation and racial self-identification in South Africa has largely focused on how South Africans experienced racial categorisation historically during pre-Apartheid era (before 1948), during Apartheid (1948-1994) and in post-Apartheid contemporary South Africa (1994 onwards) (see for example, Frederickson 1981; Norval 1996; Erasmus 2001; Maylam 2001; Posel 2001a, 2001b; Goldberg 2002; Clark and Worger 2004; Alexander 2006; MacDonald 2006; Seekings 2008; Steyn 2008). Furthermore, despite the official political ideology of ‘non-racialism’, the concept of race and practices of racial classification
is still a hotly debated issue in contemporary South Africa (see Seekings 2008; Hammett 2010; Shutts 2011; Schieferdecker 2014; Carvalho-Maleka 2015).

The predominant focus on South African nationals regarding topics of race and racial self-identification opens up other important research questions that have been largely ignored by South African scholarship on race and racial self-identification: How are non-South Africans who are becoming part of the contemporary South African society, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, economic migrants etc., implicated in practices of racial categorisation and/or racial self-identifications in post-Apartheid South Africa? What does the concept of race and/or racial self-identifications mean to them? And what are their patterns of adaptation to the South African ways of racial self-identification habits? Racialisation (imposed racial classification) continues to occur in contemporary South Africa along two main dimensions: on institutional forms (Alexander 2006: 3) and in everyday social interactions as a pervasive ‘common-sense’ notion (Posel 2001a: 109; 2001b: 56; Hammett 2010: 252). The question then arises, in relation to refugees and asylum-seekers, who originate from societies with non-racial classification systems such as Eritrea, how are such forms of imposed racial classification experienced by such communities? The paucity of research on the racialisation experiences and racial self-identification patterns of refugee and asylum-seeker communities creates a space to explore this phenomenon in contemporary South Africa.

There is extensive literature on refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa. The topics of interest include, *inter alia*, xenophobia (Handmaker & Parsley 2001; Palmary 2002; Vale 2002; Palmary 2003; Landau 2010; Abdi 2011; Chinomona & Maziriri 2015), livelihoods (Jakobsen 2006), migrant poverty (Crus 2010), citizenship (Amisi & Ballard 2005), migratory trajectories (Araia 2005), human rights (Landau 2005 2006), well-being (Greyling 2016). Scholarship on the encounter of non-South Africans such as refugees and asylum-seekers with race in South Africa appears to be scant.

Exceptions are ethnographic studies by Vandeyar (2011), and Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) on the racialisation experiences of immigrant youth in a high school context in Johannesburg as well as Abdi (2015). Vandeyar (2011), and Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) found that adolescent immigrants in a high-school context experienced racial classification by their South African peers and for most of them racial self-identification was an alien concept of self-identity. Such findings de-familiarise common sense notions of race and racial categorisation in the post-Apartheid context. In the case of Abdi’s (2015) work, Somali refugees in South Africa largely view themselves as members of the community of Muslims to benefit from prosperous South African Indian Muslims and rejected a racialised black
identity, but during xenophobic attacks against them emphasised their Africanness and blackness. Abdi’s (2015) finding points to the situationality of immigrant self-identity.

My study, therefore, builds on such emerging contemporary works on the racialisation experiences of non-South African refugee communities and asylum-seekers and their racial-self identification practices. I attempt to extend and enrich Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar’s (2012) studies by focusing on adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers, moving beyond a school context to include racialisation experiences on bureaucratic forms and during social encounters in multiple urban settings (Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg). I also build on Abdi’s (2015) findings by focusing on another migrant group (Eritreans).

Furthermore, this study builds on studies on the racialisation experiences of Eritreans in other national contexts such as those conducted by Shelly Habecker (2011) on Eritreans in the U.S. and Anna Arnone (2011) on Eritreans in Italy. Much of current scholarship on Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers has focused, *inter alia*, on their trans-national activities (Arnone 2008; Hepner 2013, 2015) and their migration journeys and livelihoods in their respective host countries (Trieb 2009, 2013, 2016; Lijnders 2012; Belloni 2016; Müller 2016). Little is known, however, about how Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers experience racial categorisation in their everyday life and their practices of racial self-identifications in their host societies, such as in contemporary South African racial landscape.

These studies reveal how different immigrant groups experienced imposed racial classification and their complex and varied ways of responding to racial ascription both by members of the race-conscious host society and institutions such as the census. However, despite the proliferation of such research in other national contexts, where racial classification practices are pervasive, scholarly knowledge on the everyday racialisation experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers in the South African national context appears to be scant. The current study, therefore, fits into the international literature and is in conversation with this body of scholarship.

Relating to the paucity of studies and theory on the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers adapt to their host societies in the African continent, Berry (1997: 6-7) noted that:

The literatures pertaining to migrant peoples (including immigrants, sojourners, and refugees), especially in adaptation to North America, Australia, and to a lesser extent to Europe are emphasised; largely absent are studies in Asian, African, and South American settings (where, in fact, most acculturation has taken place). This bias reflects the availability of literature for some peoples of the world, but not for others.

**Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study**

Given this knowledge gap, it is necessary to give voice to refugee and asylum-seekers communities in South Africa about how they experience racial classification. Moreover, there is also a need to explore what racial classification means to such marginalised communities, as people who were unfamiliar with such practices in their countries of origin, and how they adapt to South African racial self-identification habits and practices. Finally, it is imperative to use these experiences as a mirror against which to read the main contours of contemporary South Africa and the status of race in this society.

The choice to recruit Eritreans as participants for this study emanated from three considerations: First, given my embeddedness in the Eritrean community, I established in my informal conversations that Eritreans experienced racialisation in everyday life. Second, I selected Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers from among other refugee communities out of convenience, as I speak Tigrinya, as they do, share the same ethnic background and can relate to their experiences of racialisation as a person who also experience racialisation in my everyday life. Finally, Eritreans of the Tigrinya ethnic group are phenotypically diverse, a
factor that makes for a particularly rich social analysis in a race-conscious society such as South Africa. Through the lens of the everyday experiences of the study participants, I also attempt to have a glimpse into the status of the phenomenon of everyday racialisation in social interactions in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa originate from a social classification system and self-identification practices based on ethno-linguistic, ethno-regional, ethno-national and kinship identities (Woldemikael 1993: 18; Bereketeab 2000: 35; Kibreab 2000: 255; Naty 2001: 578; Bereketeab 2002: 138-139; Dirar 2007: 257). Given the socio-cultural background from which Eritreans originate, their encounter with race and racial categorisation in South Africa, with which they were unfamiliar back in Eritrea, is a worthwhile research topic to investigate. The purpose of this study is also to give voice to the marginalised and silent everyday experiences of Eritrean refugee and asylum-seeker communities in South Africa.

Significance of the Study
The current study has important implications for the literature on race, ethnicity and immigration in contemporary South Africa. For example, how are such communities shaping traditional self-identifications practices of the South African society, which will include newly integrating immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, by introducing self-identifications practices, which such groups bring with them into South Africa? How are they re-defining traditional South African notions of race and racial self-identifications?

It also builds on the field of Eritrean Diaspora studies by enriching recent studies of the racialisation experiences of Eritreans in other national contexts (Arnone 2011; Habecker 2012). It could also re-focus scholarship on Eritrean Diaspora studies from topics of political transnationalism, experiences of deportation, human rights and journeys to asylum destinations, to dimensions of their encounter with race and racial categorisation and practices of their self-identification in their respective host societies.

Research Question
In order to achieve the purpose of the study and guide the overall research process, one overarching research question and three subsidiary research questions are posed. The main research question is:
How do first-generation adult Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers (originating from an ethnicity-based self-identification practice) adjust, in their self-identification, when transitioning into a race-conscious South African society of settlement when experiencing imposed racial categorisation?

The three subsidiary research questions are:

1. How do adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers experience racialisation (imposed racial categorisation) on bureaucratic forms and by ordinary South Africans in their everyday lives?

2. How do adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers give meaning to race and the experiences of racialisation in their everyday lives in the race-conscious South African society of settlement?

3. To what extent do adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers racially self-identify as a result of imposed everyday racialisation experiences in South Africa and how do they retain, shed or negotiate their ethnicity-based and other self-identifications?

Research Design and Methodological Orientation

Given the aim of the study, I employed a broadly qualitative methodology (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) and more specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009) to achieve the purpose of the research. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, as a methodological lens, enabled me to capture and illuminate the subjective, complex and nuanced racialisation experiences of participants, their sense making of their racialisation experiences as well as the impact of their racialisation on their identity formation. The intention was to understand the phenomenon under study through the eyes of the study participants for which IPA was suitable. Smith et al. (2009:163) stress the usefulness of the methodological lens of IPA in understanding how identity is subjectively experienced in contexts of life transitions, and more specifically the impact of migration on identity for immigrants who transition from one socio-cultural context to another (Smith et al. 2009: 172) . I recruited 31 men and 15 women in total. I conducted 15 interviews in Johannesburg (five women and ten men), 16 in Cape Town (four women and 12 men) and 15 in Durban (six women and nine men).
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Study

The philosophical lens that broadly informs this study is social constructionism. I approach this study with the assumption that social reality is constructed in interaction, dynamic and contextually located. I, therefore, approach the constructs of race and ethnicity as social constructs rather than as biological and primordial ‘facts’. I employ racialisation theory (Omi and Winant 1994) to interpret racial classification processes at an everyday micro-scale level. I also draw on ethnic identity formation theory (Phinney 1990) in order to make sense of the ethnic identity re-awakening processes of participants. Linear assimilation theories (Gordon 1971; Gans 1973), acculturation strategies theory (Berry 1997) and fluid identity construction theory (Suárez-Orozco’s 2004) are also brought to bear on the research material in order to account for the adaptation or adjustment patterns of study participants to South African racial identity categories.

Thesis Outline

Chapter two comprises a review of theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed the study. Broadly, the frameworks draw on multiple interrelated bodies of scholarship, namely racial and ethnic identity theories, David Theo Goldberg’s (2002) racial state theory, and theories of immigrant adaptation.

Chapter three comprises a discussion of the Eritrean socio-cultural context (outlining the ethnicity-based social stratification system and self-identification practices prevalent in Eritrean society) followed by the South African socio-cultural context (outlining the historical and contemporary status of race and ethnicity). Next, I discuss the literature on racialisation experiences and self-identification practices of Eritrean refugees/immigrants in various national contexts followed by the literature on the racialisation and self-identification practices of immigrants in the South African context. Lastly, international literature on the racialisation experiences and self-identification patterns of immigrants of diverse national origins in their respective settlement societies are reviewed.

Chapter four discusses the particular type of qualitative methodology employed in this thesis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a research approach is outlined and embedded in a discussion of its underpinnings, in particular phenomenology and hermeneutics. Details about the research sites and participant recruitment and selection and the profiles of study participants in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg are provided. In addition, I discuss my positionality and role as researcher. I also explore in-depth
interviewing as a data collection method, the data analysis techniques employed (informed by IPA), as well as more conceptual questions about the reach of the research results, ethical considerations and the limitations of the study.

Chapter five constitutes an attempt to answer a part of the first subsidiary research question, which focuses on Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers’ subjective experiences of racialisation in relation to administrative and bureaucratic forms. The complex ways in which participants experienced and reacted to a diversity of administrative forms that ask for their racial category are presented and discussed.

Chapter six explores the second part of the first subsidiary research question examining the racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in their everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans. Five different experiences are identified: (1) racialised as coloured; (2) racialised as Indian; (3) racialised alternately as Indian and coloured; (4) racialised as black; and (5) what are you? You look racially ambiguous. Both the varied experiences and broader implications thereof are examined.

Chapter seven focuses on the meanings participants give to experiences of racialisation as well as their patterns of adaptation to the South African racial self-identification practices. In general, participants rejected the notion of racial categorisation but their strategies and reasons for doing so draw on multiple sources. Four such positions and identifications are discussed: (1) race and racial categorisation as meaningless; (2) asserting a national origin self-identification as Eritrean; (3) asserting a Habesha self-identification; and (4) asserting a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification.

Chapter eight comprises an analysis of the accounts of participants who self-identified in racial terms as black, and coloured. Participants who self-identified as black offered a range of motivations categorised as follows: (1) forsaking old identities and appropriating a new black racial identity; (2) identifying with black history and the adoption of a black racial identity; (3) if I am perceived as black then I am black; (4) feeling black when living in black neighbourhoods; (5) having black friends makes me feel black; (6) a strategic adoption of a black racial identity and (7) passing for black to be invisible. The study participants who self-identified as coloured supported their identification drawing on three modes of argument: (1) coloured is beautiful: I am coloured; (2) I am coloured because of my wife and child; and (3) my physical appearance makes me coloured.

Chapter nine considers the results of the study and their implications for race, ethnicity and migration studies in contemporary South Africa; international literature on immigrant adaptation theories; and more generally the growing field of Eritrean Diaspora studies. An
implication for reforming the bureaucratic categories is suggested and the study’s limitations and future directions are outlined. The thesis concludes with my reflections on the research process.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Introduction
In this chapter, I first outline my overarching theoretical approach to the study, namely social
constructionism. I also draw on two bodies of theoretical work: Theories of race and
ethnicity, and theories of adaptation to identity categories.

Next, I discuss theoretical debates surrounding the concepts of race and ethnicity: between those who subscribe to essentialised notions of race and ethnicity, and those who
argue for the socially-constructed aspects of the concepts. I then discuss Omi and Winant’s
(1994) racialisation theory that argues that individuals, such as those previously unracialised
immigrants, confront assigned racial identity categories in their everyday life in race-
conscious host societies. According to this perspective, external racial classification based on
the logic of physical markers becomes an everyday racial identity experience for immigrants.
Racialisation theory assists me in order to make sense of the everyday racialisation
experiences of the participants. I also consider racial identity theories in particular Cross’
(1995) black racial identity development theory. According to this perspective, individuals
follow defined stages until they finally attain an internalised black racial identity. I draw on
this approach in order to interpret the black identity formation of Eritreans in the South
African racial landscape. I briefly outline Goldberg’s (2002) theory on the characteristics of a
racial state to conceptualise the South African state as a racialising structure. I discuss
Phinney’s (1990) ethnic identity formation theory. According to this model, individuals such
as immigrants, go through progressively increasing ethnic-identity-awareness phases in a
racialised society. I adopted this approach in order to account for the ethnic identity re-
awakening of my participants.

In relation to the second body of theoretical work, I discuss identity adjustment theories
for transitioning immigrants in their host societies. For example, Milton Gordon (1971) and
Gans’ (1973) linear assimilation theories propose that immigrants follow rigidly predictable
patterns of adapting to social identities found in their host societies. Generational status and
length of stay are seen as powerful factors in determining how immigrants adopt host-
society-based identity categories. Berry’s (1997) acculturation theory diverges from the
straight-line theories argument and advances a more flexible account of how immigrants
adjust to identity categories in their new host culture. Berry proposed four paths that
individuals choose to follow, namely the assimilation strategy, the separation strategy, the integration strategy, and the marginalisation strategy. Carola Suárez-Orozco’s theory (2004) proposes a more flexible and fluid notion of immigrant identity formation by arguing that immigrants tend not to follow predictable paths in adapting to host society-based identity categories but instead tend to be shaped by situational and contextual factors.

**Social Constructionism/Interpretivism: My Macro-Theoretical Perspective**

I locate this study within a social constructionist, also described as an interpretivist framework (see Mertens, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I utilise this perspective in thinking about the nature of racialisation experience and self-identification of the study participants.

Following the social constructionist view (Crotty 1998:9), I assume that experiences and identities are historically and culturally embedded. Thus, experiences such as racialisation, racial identities and self-identification practices are socio-culturally located and socially constructed artefacts produced and shaped by the history and culture and everyday intersubjective social interactions among social actors. This perspective fits with phenomenology as a theoretical perspective, and particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis, the methodological approach of this study, which focuses on the inter-subjective everyday experience. As Crotty (1998:12) emphasised, ‘Constructitionism and phenomenology are intertwined’.

Within this philosophical lens, I believe that individuals, in their social world, carry understandings of the world in which they live and act. Furthermore, they construct subjective meanings of their lived experiences of social phenomena. My ontological belief, under this world view assumes that the subjective experiences and meanings research participants have about their lived racialisation experiences, as well as their meaning making and self-identification practices are situational, fluid, varied and multiple. This belief led me, as a researcher, to look for the multiplicity, situatedness and complexity of experiences and meanings, instead of collapsing experiences and meanings into pre-determined categories and ideas as is the tradition with objectivist research tradition. Following Lincoln and Guba (2000: 163), the goal of my study, then, is to focus on my research participants’ subjective views and perspectives to understand the phenomenon under study.

I believe that epistemologically the subjective experiences and meanings of the participants are negotiated, shaped and produced during social interaction with me, as an

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5I have discussed the IPA approach in the Methodology Chapter
interviewer, during the interview situation which is supported by the view of social
constructionism. I, as a researcher, co-construct meanings and knowledge together with my
research participants as opposed to endeavouring to locate objective ‘truth’ in participants’
accounts (Moustakas, 1994: 23).

I am aware that, when participants construct their experiences and meanings in
interaction with me as a researcher, they do so shaped by their past experiences and the
present. As a researcher, I recognise that my own background also shaped my interpretations
of study participants’ accounts of their experiences. My understandings of the experiences of
the study participants is coloured by my past experiences, beliefs, and worldviews (Schwandt

Therefore, social constructionism as a perspective informs my interpretative
phenomenological analysis methodological approach which in turn shaped the type of data
collected that focused on the everyday socially constructed experiences of participants within
an inter-subjective interview context.

I now turn to theoretical and conceptual frameworks as they relate to the substance of
the study. Below, I offer a brief account of scholarly debates about race and ethnicity. The
social constructionist position I adopt has implications for these two conceptual terms that are
frequently used in this study.

**Theories of Race, Ethnicity, and the Racial State**

**Race: biological essentialism vs. social construction**

Conceptually, the idea of race has been a contentious terrain in academic debates. The
debates could be broadly classified between two schools of thought: between those who
assert race to be a biologically objective reality (Mayr and Ashlock 1991: 104-105) and those
who rejected such position and argued for the socially invented (Omi and Winant 1994: 34)
and ideological (Root 1998: 630) nature of the concept.

In the nineteenth and twentieth-century biological realism, the scientific belief that
races are ‘real’ dominated much of the debate in academia. Key proponents of the biological
realism perspective, such as Mayr and Ashlock (1991: 105) asserted that races were
biologically objective categories independent of human classification endeavours. This
outlook that advocated an essentialist view of race and racial categories believed that there
are common essences linking members of a particular racial category. Mayr and Ashlock
(1991: 103-107), specially argued that human races exist as ‘sub-species’ within the
overarching human race as more or less mutually exclusive kinds with their respective cultural distinctions, behavioural dispositions and physiological differences.

However, other academics such as Lewontin, Rose and Kamin 1984 (as cited in Andreasen 1998: 654-655) criticised such essentialist views of races by claiming that racial categories are socio-politically constructed human inventions. Smedley (1998: 690) for example, noted that, race as a concept and ideology is a recent social construction designed to socially stratify human populations in order to differentially distribute resources along invented racial categories. Smedley further notes that the idea of naming and categorising people in racial terms appeared around the seventeenth-century. Smedley succinctly captured the socially constructed essence of race by saying ‘Race is a cultural invention that it bears no intrinsic relationship to actual human physical variations, but reflects social meanings imposed upon these variations’ (Smedley 1998: 690).

Scholars who subscribe to the social construction school of thought also argued that the belief in the existence of distinct races are unsubstantiated by concrete evidence, such as the mapping genetic composition of the so-called ‘distinct races’ as believed by scholars such as Mayr and Ashlock (1991). Scholars contended that genetic variation within the so-called races tends to be much greater than those categories deemed distinct by realist scholars. However, scholars of social constructionism do not necessarily believe race to be merely a fiction but a socio-historically and socio-politically created concept that eventually became a common-sense social understanding. For example, as Omi and Winant (1994: 4) argued, the historically invented racial categories continue to shape how ordinary people, living in race-conscious cultures, categorise themselves and other people based on outward physical markers, such as, inter alia, hair type, skin tone, and facial features. Race has become a social reality for people who live in racialised societies such as South Africa. Omi and Winant (1994: 12-14) more specifically employed the concept of ‘racialisation’ to emphasise the process-driven and socio-culturally embedded nature of racial categories and to stress the socially-created aspect of race. Goldberg (2006: 234-237), employed the notion of ‘racial regionalism’ to argue that race and racial categories do not have universal meaning and application, but are constructed and given meanings in particular socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts in different geographic regions.

6 ‘Racialised societies’ are understood, for the purpose of this thesis, as societies in which notions of difference is based on phenotype in the form of institutionalised racial categories and diffused in everyday life in the form of phenotype-based self and other identifications. Hence, I have characterised South Africa as a racialised society.
I subscribe to the school of thought that race is a social construct; and it is with this assumption that I conducted my study by focusing on the notion of racialisation as a socially-embedded phenomenon. In studying Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers’ racialisation experiences, following Omi and Winant (1994), I focus on how racial categories were constructed in everyday social interactions between Eritreans and ordinary South Africans through the accounts of the study participants.

Below, I discuss ethnicity, which is a necessary corollary concept to race when studying identity formation of immigrants/refugees/asylum-seekers in their race-conscious socio-cultural contexts. As has been argued by numerous immigration scholars, inter alia, Golash-Boza (2006), Itzigsohn, Giorguli & Vazquez (2006), Kusow (2006) and Vandeyar (2011), when immigrants who originate from ethnicity-based social classification systems transition into socio-cultural contexts with racial classification systems, they engage in continuous negotiation and re-negotiation of their ethnicities when confronted with imposed racialisation.

Ethnicity: primordialism vs. circumstantialism

Scholars define the concept of ethnicity and ethnic identity in different ways. For example, Negel (1994: 152-153) defined ethnicity as a sense of attachment ‘constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality.…’ For such scholars, ethnicity, besides the cultural element, involves a sense of belonging to a group sharing similar phenotypic features (biological similarity). Other scholars, such as Phinney (2007: 272), emphasised the cultural dimensions of ethnicity and ethnic identity as ‘…speaking the language, eating the food, and associating with members of one’s group.…’ Such definitions do not refer to physical appearance as constituting the definition of ethnicity, as their emphasis is on the cultural attachments of the individuals involved.

Other immigration scholars have defined ethnic identity in terms of a sense of belonging to non-racial forms of social boundaries, such as religion (Kusow and Arjouch 2007), clan (Kusow 2006), regional attachments (Suárez-Orozco’s 2004), and country of origin (Golash-Boza 2006; Vandeyar 2011; Alemu 2012). In the context of my study, ethnic self-identification refers to a sense of being a member of a social category, found in one’s country of origin, which is not based on physical appearance but other notions of social differentiation, such as, inter alia, ethno-linguistic groupings, ethno-regional location, village
of origin, and myths of common origin, as in the case of the Eritrean ethnic groups (Bereketeab 2000: 35; Naty 2001: 578; Dirar 2007: 257).

Broadly speaking, debates surrounding attachment to ethnic identity is dichotomised into two schools of thought: primordial ethnicity (Gil-White, 1999; Van Evera 2001) vs instrumental/situational ethnicity (Nagel 1994; Gorenburg 1999; Brubaker 2002). Proponents of the primordiality contend that ethnic identity is an enduring, unchanging and deeply-felt attachment individuals have to their ethnic group which they believe they belong to (Gil-White, 1999:799). For example, a key proponent of the primordial camp, Van Evera (2001: 20) argued that ‘ethnic identities are not stamped on our genes, but once a sense of attachment to a group is formed, they tend to stay’. Furthermore, another primordialist, (Gil-White, 1999: 799-722), noted that individuals who exhibit deeply-felt strong attachments to their group, tend to base this on their beliefs and perceptions as opposed to, for example, an actual blood line that bind a group together. However, other proponents of the primordiality of ethnic identification such as Van den Berghe (1981 cited in Hale 2004: 460) argued that a sense of ethnic identification is predicated on actual blood attachment to individuals’ ethnic group or kinship rather than perceived association.

Those who propose an instrumental understanding of ethnic identity contend that ethnic identity is a social construct, and therefore a dynamic, and situationally dependent phenomenon (Nagel 1994: 154; Gorenburg 1999: 577; Brubaker 2002: 164). Such scholars proposed that people actively and consciously move between different versions of their ethnic identities and change them at will depending on the value and instrumentality of a group identity in a particular situation.

I subscribe to the situational and instrumental school of thought of ethnicity and ethnic identity formation as I believe that individuals, especially in the context of migration, tend to use their ethnic identities as a resource for instrumental reasons depending on contextual circumstances in their everyday life.

In the following section, I discuss racialisation theory, an important theoretical lens that I employed to interpret the participant’s every day encounters with being seen as having a racial identity.

**Racialisation theory**

Omi and Winant (1994: 14) defined ‘racialisation’ as ‘the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship or group’. According to this perspective,
individuals who were not externally identified or self-identified themselves in terms of racial categories, experience an encounter with being racially categorised in racially organised socio-cultural contexts.

Embedded within a social constructionist analytical paradigm, Omi and Winant (1994) devised the theory to make sense of how racialisation in the U.S. operates both at structural/institutional and everyday inter-personal levels. For Omi and Winant (1994: 12), racial identities are socio-political products that mean different things in different socio-cultural and geographic contexts. They further view race as a creation of ‘social relations’ susceptible to transformation rather than a stable and rigid concept (Omi and Winant 1994: 12). This view of race as a product of social relations means that race is a by-product of an interaction between macro-level institutional structures and inter-personal interactions between individuals at a micro-scale level, and tends to be constantly subject to change. Further, Omi and Winant (1986: 12) conceived of race as a pervasive and ubiquitous component of both our inter-personal encounters and institutional culture in racialised societies. In the following quote, Omi and Winant describe the fluidity and contextuality of race and racialisation:

The meaning of “race” is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and reformed (1986: 12).

Here, Omi and Winant, emphasised the unstable characteristics of race as racial identities undergo transformation due to continuous interactions both at a micro-scale level, between individuals, and social collectives at institutional level. In other words, racial identities tend to be constantly changing and dynamic during inter-personal encounters as opposed to being fixed and constant.

According to Omi and Winant (1994: 14), in race-conscious cultures, during personal encounters, people have ‘...preconceived notions of what each specific racial group looks like... and one of the first things we notice about people when we meet them is their race’. Omi and Winant (1994: 14) also argued that, people ‘utilise race to provide clues about who a person is’ (emphasis in original). According to this argument, individuals have prior images of what types of bodies people are expected to have for them to be meaningfully racially perceived. When individuals interact, they look for clues such as a person’s physical features
to establish which racial identity a person carries (Omi and Winant 1994: 12-13). Omi and Winant (1994: 61) also stated that during interpersonal social encounters, people habitually make ‘… seemingly infinite number of racial judgments … at the level of individual experience’.

According to this perspective, during personal encounters between social actors, race thinking tends to be pervasive in race-conscious national contexts. In such social environments, identifying and representing bodies in racial terms is a common practice of the interacting persons.

Omi and Winant (1994: 12) further theorised that in contexts where racial identities are salient forms of social identities, ‘without a racial identity one is in danger of having no identity’ at all. This means that, when individuals in racially-conscious cultures interact, they have the tendency to categorise the race of the other person. For such social actors, not having a racial identity is disturbing. In other words, when in a race-conscious society, the physical appearance of individuals are ambiguous, their racial category placement tends to be problematic for members of race-conscious cultures. Omi and Winant (1994: 12) noted that:

The fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize, someone who is [perceived to be], for example, racially “mixed” or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning. Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.

In another place, Omi and Winant (1994: 12) noted that when persons are uncategorisable in a racial society, and subsequently when people ‘…cannot conveniently racially categorise…’ individuals with ambiguous physical appearance, those who categorise experience a ‘…crisis of racial meaning….’

According to this theoretical perspective, the everyday repeated imposed racialisation experiences of immigrants prompt the subjects of racialisation to develop race-consciousness and begin to see their racial identity location in the racial structure of the racial order within which they are located (Omi and Winant 1994: 14). Eventually, for the racialised, their racial formation emerges as a salient feature of their self-identity.
Racialisation theory has been critiqued by sociologists for its supposition of race as a social reality and for implicitly reifying race. Such scholars advocate a moratorium on the concept of racialisation as an analytical concept to explain racial perception and racial self-identification. For example, Miles and Brown (2003) argued that since there are no objective races the continued reference to racialisation tends to signify something that did not exist and effectively reifies race. Miles and Brown (2003: 90) also emphasised that ‘social scientists have prolonged the life of an idea [racialisation] that should be consigned to the dustbin of analytically useless terms’. St. Louis (2005: 36) also contended that ‘given the fallaciousness of the race idea, racialisation reinforces the [idea] of biological processes of constituting racial groups as real’. Racialisation theory is also critiqued for its tendency to conceive of racialisation as a permanent feature of racially stratified societies and does not provide hope for its erasure in future (St. Louis 2005). The definition of racialisation as referring to ‘different types of human bodies’ (Omi & Winant, 1994: 55) is also critiqued by St. Louis, (2005: 44) as a tendency to naturalise race difference. I argue, however, that Omi & Winant’s (1994: 55) use of ‘different types of human bodies’ is used to refer to social constructions of bodies and does not presuppose essentialised notions of bodily differences. Along with Omi & Winant (1994), I argue that in the South African context, individuals are still perceived in racial terms as black, coloured, etc., by referring to certain bodily markers that bear social meanings, such as hair texture, skin tone and facial features. I, therefore, contend that racialisation has validity and is a useful analytical concept for capturing the continued existence of racial classification practices in everyday life in South Africa.

As the focus of my study was how race was experienced at a micro-scale level between interacting individuals and between the racialised individuals and racialising institutions in the form of administrative forms, racialisation theory is a useful lens to understand the dynamic in such encounters.

This theoretical perspective fits in with a social constructionist orientation as it emphasises the construction of race and racial formation within the realm of everyday social interactions. Racial identity is viewed as a creation and artefact embedded within the social as opposed to having a biological objectivity. Racialisation theory as a conceptual frame was useful in my understandings of the construction of race and racial identity when my study participants interacted with both institutional forms and ordinary South Africans in their everyday life.
Racial identity theories

Theories that account for how individuals develop consciousness of racial identities in racially organised societies come from U.S. scholars and focus, for example, on white racial identity development (Helms 1990), and black racial identity development (Cross 1995) in the U.S. racial system. As racial identities are socio-culturally (geographically) situated social constructions (Goldberg 1993: 19; Omi and Winant 1994: 44; Appiah 1996: 7-9; Root 1998: 629), there appear to be no universally applicable racial identity theories. However, one could borrow theoretical models and explanations developed in one context to make sense of a related or similar phenomenon occurring in another socio-cultural context. With this conviction, therefore, and in order to make sense of how Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers develop black consciousness in South Africa, I have borrowed concepts from Cross (1995). Cross’ black racial identity development theory, a theoretical model that was used by immigration scholars such as Asante (2012) to explain how immigrants racialised as black in the U.S. racial order adopted black racial identity consciousness, was developed to account for black racial consciousness in the U.S.

According to this theory, a person transitions through five stages of development in the formation of a black racial identity within the United States race-conscious society. Cross (1995: 94) called this theoretical model Nigrescence or the stages of becoming black. The five developmental stages that a person passes through to become black are: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross 1995: 95-113).

In the pre-encounter stage (Cross 1995: 95), the person is not aware of their own racial identities. The person, furthermore, is not aware of the effect and power of imposed racial identities on their life chances and interpersonal social relationships in white majority societies. During the encounter stage (Cross 1995: 97), the individual for the first time comes into contact with experiences of racialisation and an inclination to racial self-identification. For example, according to this conceptual model, the experience of racism in the white dominant U.S. society and everyday ascribed racial classification produces awareness of one’s racial identity on the part of the racialised person. The third stage is immersion (Cross 1995: 98), in which the individual is immersed in their new-found black racial identity and exhibits committed involvement with their black in-group community formed by shared experiences of racism and exclusion, at the same time, distancing themselves from white out-group racial communities. This immersion and complete self-identification with a black racial identity is finally followed by a stage known as ‘internalisation and commitment’ (Cross
1995: 101), in which, the black self-identified persons develop full commitment and pride in their blackness and begin to assert self-identification as black.

The theory of black racial identity development has been critiqued by scholars such as Constantine et al. (1998) for its linearity and rigidity. They argued that the theory tends to generalize the stages of black identity development to a broad range of blacks outside the U.S. context (Constantine et al. 1998: 97-98). They also emphasised that different situational and contextual factors may shape the racial identity development of black individuals rather than conceptualising the theory as a decontextualised and universal phenomenon (Constantine et al. 1998: 98).

It should be noted that in Cross’ (1995) notion of the pre-encounter stage of black racial identity development, the concept is not referring to a complete ignorance of the existence of ideas of race and racial identities. I am aware that in an era of a technologically interconnected world, where localised ideas and practices become globally available, Eritreans, before their emigration, were arguably exposed to notions of race (e.g., black/white dichotomy) through diverse forms of media. The pre-encounter stage in Cross’ (1995) theory is used in relation to racial self-identification practice — before one is aware of learning about one’s racial location as black in a racially stratified social order.

When viewed through a social constructionist lens, the model tends to be stage-oriented, which might not capture the fluid, dynamic, and strategic nature of a black racial identity formation for immigrants, but remains conceptually useful for this study.

Below, I discuss the concept of a racial state which is an important concept for the purpose of my study in order to account for the post-apartheid South African state as a racialising state.

**A racial state**

I argue, concurring with David Theo Goldberg (2002) that post-Apartheid South Africa can be viewed as a racial state. South Africa can be characterised as a state that formally organises the society into racial categories. Based on this assumption, I explore the imposed racialisation experiences, through bureaucratic racialisation, for example, of my study participants and how they responded to the racial order. Goldberg (2002: 110) argued that one of the typical characteristics of a racial state is that the state ‘define[s] populations into racially identified groups…’ such as through ‘…census taking, and bureaucratic forms’.
Such institutional racialising practices by the state, according to Goldberg (2002: 216), exemplifies the case of post-Apartheid South Africa, despite its official policy of ‘non-racialism’, in which the state is engaged in identifying racial groups in various bureaucratic forms. Such practice effectively perpetuates Apartheid-era racial categories and ‘reinstates the very racial configurations it is expressly committed to challenging’ (Goldberg 2002: 216). Such racialisation practice in the form of re-establishing the old racial categories, namely black, coloured, Indian, and white is viewed by Goldberg as characterisation of the post-apartheid state as bearing the marks of a racialising state. One of the evident marks of a racial state, according to Goldberg, is the entrenching of race and racialisation into state institutional practices such as the practice of pigeonholing persons into definite racial categories in the form of census and bureaucratic forms.

Beyond the embeddedness of race and racialisation within state institutions in the form of, for example, bureaucratic forms, Goldberg (2002: 115) contended that a state could be theorised to be a racial state if it engages in the ‘routinisation’ practice of racialisation. In such cases, the state through its pervasive racialisation practices, normalises race as common sense and natural for is racialised subjects in their everyday social interactions. Therefore, race and racialisation becomes a bureaucratic routine, at the institutional level and an everyday common sense reality for the subjects of the racialising state. Therefore, I argue, echoing Goldberg’s perspective that the contemporary South African state, through its race-bearing institutional bureaucratic forms engages in a racialising project by imposing South African–based racial categories to persons originating from national origins of different social classification systems. Furthermore, the penetration of the state’s racial categorisations into the everyday social life as common sense is key to the experiences of the research participants of this study as they encounter racialisation by ordinary South Africans in their everyday social interactions.

Next, I discuss Phinney’s ethnic identity formation model, which is a useful theoretical model to account for my study participants’ construction of their home-country based ethnic identities in a racialised South African socio-cultural context.

**Phinney’s ethnic identity formation theory**

Scholars of immigration argue that when first-generation immigrants encounter racial categorisation by institutions and members of their country of settlement, they tend to develop a renewed awareness and consciousness of their ethnicity, which they brought from
home (Phinney 1990; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Alba and Nee 1997, 2003; Berry 1997, 2006; Waters 1999). Phinney (1990) specifically outlined the processes by which immigrants develop a heightened awareness of their ethnic identities as the dominant society of settlement imposes new racial identity categories on them.

In order to explain culture-based ethnic identity development for immigrant minority groups in the U.S., Jean S. Phinney (1990) developed a three-stage model of ethnic identity development for non-white adolescent minorities. Influenced by Erik Erikson (1970) and James Marcia (1966), whose theoretical work proposed a linear-based identity development of adolescent persons, Phinney formulated a stage-based conceptual model of ethnic identity development: unexamined or diffused stage of ethnic identity, the moratorium stage of ethnic identity and the final achieved stage of ethnic identity. However, Phinney (1990: 505) argued that this stage based ethnic identity development is not always true and inevitable for all members of minority groups; instead some individuals could dwell on one stage for their entire lives without necessarily progressing into the next stage.

According to Phinney (1990: 506), during the unexamined or diffused stage, culture-based ethnic identity is less important for persons of minority groups, and they consider ethnic identity as insignificant for their sense of self. For example, according to this argument, an immigrant person, before coming into contact with the dominant culture into which they transition, tends to place minimal emphasis on their ethnic identity. However, due to their subsequent interactional experiences with the dominant society, they begin to be aware and develop interest in their ethnic origin. Such awareness prompts them to stage two of their ethnic identity development, which is the moratorium stage, also known as the ‘exploration stage’ (Phinney 1990: 506). During the second stage, immigrant persons begin to develop interest in their cultural heritage-based ethnic identity, such as their immigrant parents’ ethnicities and begin to acquire cultural elements such as ethnic language and other cultural practices reflecting their ethnic origin. This stage finally propels them to the final stage of ethnic identity development, which is achieved ethnic identity (Phinney 1990: 507). At this stage, the individual is theorised to have achieved an established and stable ethnic identity. According to Phinney (1990: 507), at this final level, ethnic identity becomes an important aspect of the person’s self-concept and is characterised by strong emotional/affective attachment to their culture-based ethnic identity.

Viewed from a social constructionist paradigm, Phinney’s ethnic identity formation theory appears to be somewhat restrictive and formulaic. I argue that, in everyday social interactions, immigrants might not necessarily follow pre-defined stages to regain
consciousness and assertion of their ethnic identities which they brought from home. As Suárez-Orozco’s (2004: 176) argued, ethnic identities tend to be fluid and situational. Despite such limitation, however, the concepts in the model are useful in allowing me to interpret instances of ethnicity formation of my study participants in response to their everyday racialisation experiences.

This perspective on ethnicity was useful for this study in making sense the consciousness and processes of construction of ethnic identity which the Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers developed while in South Africa because of their constant racialisation experiences.

In the following section, I discuss theoretical concepts and models that explain how immigrants adapt to identity categories found in their host societies.

**Theories of Adaptation to Identity Categories**

**Linear assimilation theories**

One of the earliest sociological theoretical explanations to account for how immigrants, predominantly immigrants from Europe became whites (assimilated into the white racial category) in the United States racial order, were assimilation theories proposed by Milton Myron Gordon (1971) and Gans (1973).

The central premises of such theories posit that the identity formation of all immigrants follow one pre-determined direction, which is to adopt social categories/identities found in their countries of settlement. This perspective argued that immigrants eventually shed their identities, which they brought from their countries of origin, and progressively melt into social categories of their host societies. Gordon argued that before immigrants begin to self-identify as members of host society’s identity categories, they are expected to pass through multiple stages of assimilation. Gordon (1971: 102) outlined seven stages of assimilation out of which he enumerated three stages that preceded the self-identification assimilation of immigrants.

The first is cultural/behavioural assimilation in which newcomers adopt the customs, languages, dress, food, values and norms of the host society. This is followed by structural assimilation whereby immigrants are incorporated into the receiving society’s ‘opportunity structure’ and institutions. The next stage is marital assimilation in which immigrants marry and have children with members of the host society. This phase prepares immigrants to identificational assimilation in which immigrants self-identify themselves according to the
available identity categories found in the host society. For Gordon (1971: 106-108), structural assimilation is viewed as the most powerful vehicle towards possibilities of identificational assimilation citing that immigrants begin to see themselves as members of the identity categories of the receiving society once they are embedded in the social institutions of the host society, such as, *inter alia*, social clubs, universities, the labour market. Implied in this model is the assumption that there is a single overarching identity category in a host society into which immigrants are assumed to assimilate which is whiteness.

Gordon’s thesis was critiqued for its rigid model and inflexibility when accounting for the identification assimilation patterns of immigrants (Portes and Zoe 1993: 84; Alba and Nee 1997: 828; 2003: 7). For example, Alba and Nee (1997: 828, 2003: 5-8) argued that Gordon’s assumption that there is a homogenous identity category in a host society into which immigrants are assimilated fails to recognise the differentiated and heterogeneous nature of most settlement societies such as the U.S. within which self-identification patterns of immigrants play out. Scholars criticising Gordon’s model also argued that the theory reflects the experiences of white immigrants and their descendants of European origin (due to their phenotypic similarity to the dominant white U.S. society). They charge that the theory does not have explanatory power for non-white immigrants in the U.S. (whose phenotype renders them visible by the dominant white society) (see Portes and Rumbaut 1996: 17; Alba and Nee 1997: 829, 2003: 6; Waters 1999: 798).

Another related theory with a linear orientation to self-identification of immigrants is Gans’ (1973) straight-line assimilation theory. The straight-line assimilation theory also shares a unidirectional orientation with Gordon’s assimilation theory because it proposes that country of origin identities gradually disappear with each successive generation of immigrants. In addition to generation, length of time in country of settlement is an important component of this theory. Gans (1973: 45) argued that immigrants who have stayed the longest in their county of settlement are viewed to assimilate more easily into the identity categories of the host society than newly arrived. According to this perspective (Gans 1973: 45-47), first-generation immigrants are viewed as having strong attachment to identities of their country of origin hence resisting self-identification as members of identity categories of their new home. The second-generation is theorised as adopting both identities of their parents’ country of origin and those of their host country (Gans 1973: 46-47). Third- and later generations are viewed, according to this theory, as fully assimilated into the host society’s identity categories (Gans 1973: 46-47). This theoretical framework is premised on the assumption of a white American identity as a dominant identity category into which early
immigrants from Europe assimilated and is based on experiences of immigrants in the U.S. context.

Other proponents of Gans’ straight-line assimilation theory, Alba and Nee (1997) and Waters (1999) supported the perspective through their findings that with the later generations of white immigrants of European origin in the United States, authentic self-identification practices in terms of their predecessors’ ethnicity-based identities weaken as they became white in the U.S. racial order.

On the other hand, other immigration scholars such as Portes and Zhou (1993: 81), Portes and Rumbaut (1996: 9) and Zhou (1997a: 981; 1997b: 66), argued that assimilation also occurs in a plethora of multiple and ‘segmented’ identity categories found in host societies and those of country of origin as opposed to one monolithic identity category as was assumed by linear assimilation theorists.

More specifically, Portes and Zhou (1993: 84) proposed that straight-line assimilation theories could only make sense to explain the experiences of European white immigrants and their descendants in the white majority U.S. racial context due to phenotype similarity and the advantage their appearance offered to allow them to be invisible and unmarked. They further argue that, non-white immigrants, by contrast, find it difficult to assimilate into the white identity category due to their visible physical appearance and associated racism and discrimination. Portes and Zhou (1993: 88), in response to classical linear assimilation theories proposed an alternative perspective known as ‘segmented assimilation theory’ which posits that immigrants also assimilate into multiple identity categories such as a black racial category as a result of the inaccessibility of the white racial category by immigrants of colour in the U.S. The concept of the segmented assimilation lens was useful for this study in mapping out the divergent ways in which my study participants self-identified according to South African racial identity categories.

Seen from the lens of social constructionism, the straight-line oriented theoretical models tend to be too reductionist and narrow and fail to account for the multiple and varied trajectories of immigrant adjustment to identity categories found in their host societies. From a social constructionism perspective, adjustment patterns of immigrants are complex and embedded within social interaction contexts that make adaptation patterns difficult to predict and are nuanced.

Furthermore, the theoretical perspectives outlined above were developed and have been employed by immigration scholars to make sense of the identity formation trajectories of immigrants of diverse national origins in the U.S. Hence, the transferability of such
explanations to other host societies with different histories and demographic landscapes tend to be limited.

For example, the South African context, that is, a black majority society, is demographically different from the U.S. context, which is a white majority society. Despite such limitations, however, conceptual frameworks of the assimilation theories could be useful in understanding patterns of racial/ethnic identify formation of refugees and asylum-seekers in the black majority (with white presence) racial context of South Africa.

John Berry (1997: 6) commented on Gordon’s unidirectional assimilation conceptual model and argued that immigrants not only assimilate into identity categories of their host societies, but also follow divergent paths to their self-identification practices. For example, according to Berry’s critique, immigrants also maintain identities that they brought from home and even self-identify both in terms of identity categories found in their country of settlement and those that they brought from their homeland. Next, I discuss Berry’s acculturation strategies model.

**Acculturation strategies theory**

Acculturation strategy as a concept can be defined as ‘the process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact’ (Gibson, 2001: 19). Berry (1997: 6) asked the question, ‘What happens to individuals who have developed in one cultural context, when they attempt to live in a new cultural context?’ This question applies to Eritreans coming from a socio-cultural context in Eritrea, where social classification is ethnicity-based, when encountering experiences of racial categorisation in their new socio-cultural context in South Africa.

Acculturation strategies theory, developed by Berry (1997), proposed that when immigrants encounter members of their societies of settlement, they adopt multiple strategies of self-identification. This theory was developed in response to popular twentieth-century assimilation theories, namely Gans’ (1973) straight-line assimilation theory and Gordon’s (1971) seven-stage assimilation model, which theorised that over time, immigrants ultimately assimilate into social categories found in their receiving countries. Acculturation strategies theory (Berry 1997) in response to assimilation theories theorised that immigrants could have multiple options of self-identification strategies other than assimilating into identities found in their countries of settlement. This perspective proposes four strategies of self-identification patterns: separation, assimilation, integration and marginalisation. However, such strategies,
according to this theory, are mediated by a multiple of factors and contexts. The four acculturation strategies and the factors and contexts that influence them are discussed below.

**Integration**

According to Berry (1997: 8-9), when encountering members of the host society an immigrant is said to adopt an integration adaptation strategy when they self-identify as members of social identities found in their host society and still maintain self-identification systems found in their country of origin. Such integration of double self-identification possibilities drawn from both society of origin and the host society are theorised, according to this model, to be a common strategy for an immigrant. This is in order to help them integrate smoothly into their new home and at the same time maintain attachment with their communities in the host society (Berry 1997: 9). According to the acculturation strategy theory (Berry 1997: 11), external contextual factors such as low levels of xenophobia and discrimination by members of the host society encourage immigrants to identify with members of the host society. Other factors also are cited to have influence on adopting the integration strategy such as the public vs. the private spheres. The private sphere (the home and the ethnic community) prompt immigrants to self-identify as members of the ethnic community; however, when in public spheres, interacting with members of the host society, immigrants tend to self-identify as members of social identities of the host society (Berry 1997: 12). Immigrants move between different self-identification systems depending on who they are interacting with.

**Assimilation**

The other acculturation strategy option for immigrants is the assimilation option, according to which, an immigrant fully self-identify as a member of social identities found in their host society and distance themselves from self-identification systems based on their country of origin (Berry 1997: 9). For those who choose to exclusively identify with their host society, they develop strong attachments to social identities in the host society as opposed to maintaining social identities of their country of origin. According to this theory, some factors influence the adoption of the assimilation strategy: For example, when there is socio-cultural and phenotypic (physical appearance) similarity between the immigrant’s society of origin and members of the society of settlement, it becomes easier for immigrants to self-identify with members if the society of settlement (Berry 1997: 13). Another factor cited by this
perspective (Berry 1997: 11) is generational status, in which later generations of immigrants are believed to fully self-identify with the social identities of the larger society.

**Separation**

The separation strategy of acculturation theorises that immigrants who fall within this category prefer to retain a country of origin-based self-identification system and reject self-identifying in terms of social identities found in their society of settlement (Berry: 9-10). According to this model, certain contextual factors shape the extent to which immigrants distance themselves from social identities found in their host society and their maintenance of self-identifications systems that they brought from their country of origin. The most salient factor cited by Berry (1997: 11) is immigrants’ perceived experiences of xenophobia and discrimination by members of the host society in that the more immigrants feel hated in their host society, the more their sense of detachment from identifying with identities found in their new homeland. This, according to this understanding, encourages immigrants to retain their country of origin-based identities. Length of residence is also theorised to have an influence on the level of identification of immigrants with the host society. Those who stayed longer are more likely to socialise into and adopt self-identification systems of the country of settlement than newcomers. Newcomer immigrants, according to this model, tend to retain the self-identification systems of their country of origin. The other factor cited is levels of contact with members of one’s ethnic community (such as ethnic enclaves). Immigrants who are embedded in their ethnic enclaves and frequently interact with members of their ethnic communities tend to maintain self-identification with their society of origin (Berry 1997: 25). The degree of cultural similarity between the society of origin of the immigrant and the host society also influences the separation strategy (Berry 1997: 23). For example, newcomer immigrants unfamiliar with social categories found in their host society, tend to have difficulty incorporating such identities into their sense of self.

**Marginalisation**

According to the acculturation strategy model, an immigrant adopting a marginalisation strategy rejects self-identification as a member of country of origin social categories and those of the host society (Berry 1997: 9). This theory suggests that persons choosing such a strategy tend to be influenced by experiences of discrimination and hatred by members of the host society and at the same time experiences of rejection by their own ethnic communities.
According to this model, the rejection by immigrants of self-identification as members of both the society of origin and settlement is a rare phenomenon but not impossible.

As the focus of acculturation strategies theory is how immigrants choose to self-identify when coming into contact with members of the host society, the perspective is compatible with the IPA approach as IPA’s methodological focus is on the everyday experience of a phenomenon.

Berry’s explanation of immigrants’ strategies of adjustment to identity categories found in their host societies is congruent with a social constructionist perspective as it emphasises the importance of social contextual circumstances influencing and shaping patterns of identificational adaptation.

Berry’s acculturation strategy model underscores the contingency of self-identification strategies employed by immigrants on social and personal variables as I have outlined above. Hence the strategies should not be seen as rigid, context-free routes of self-identification patterns.

Enriching and even complicating Berry’s model, by proposing a more fluid understanding of identity formation for immigrants is the work of Carola Suárez-Orozco (2004).

### Suárez-Orozco’s fluid identity formation theory

In addition to the above perspectives, in order to make sense of the lived, everyday, complex and context-dependent self-identification experiences of the study participants, I have also framed the findings within Carola Suárez-Orozco’s (2004) theoretical lens, which emphasises the fluidity and situationality of identity formation of immigrants in settlement societies.

According to Suárez-Orozco (2004: 177), the formation of identity for immigrants in a new context tends to be multifaceted, complex, unpredictable, fluid and highly context-dependent and the meanings immigrants attach to their self-identification tend to be complex and multiple. Carola Suárez-Orozco (2004: 179) criticised traditional perspectives of identity formation such as an Eriksonian (1968 cited in Suárez-Orozco 2004: 178) rigid and pre-defined stage-based identity formation theory and thus also Marcia’s (1980: 162) linear and one-directional ethnic/racial identity attainment model. Erikson’s modernist orientation postulates that identity follows a unidirectional path progressing towards a defined goal that is the attainment of a stable identity for the individual (Erikson 1968, cited in Suárez-Orozco 2004: 179).
The core assumption of this developmental outlook views the self as coherent and continuous (Erikson 1968, cited in Suárez-Orozco 2004: 178). For Marcia (1980: 169), the formation of ethnic or racial self-identification follows a linear and progressive development of one’s awareness as a member of a given ethnic/racial social group. According to Marcia’s (1966: 557) model, an individual progresses from an ethnic or racial awareness towards the next stage of exploration and finally an achieved sense of one’s racial or ethnic identity. Suárez-Orozco (2004: 178) challenged such traditional assumptions of identity formation, arguing that identity in the real-world, lived, everyday experience is characterised by fluidity and contextuality as opposed to predetermined rigid stages. Suárez-Orozco (2004) illustrated the situational and contextual nature of identity formation depending on social identity categories and self-identification habits found in a country or region inhabited by an individual:

Rather it is a process that is fluid and contextually driven. If raised in Beijing and immigrating as an adult, one may ‘discover’ that one is ‘Asian’ for the first time... In Beijing, that same individual may never have considered her racial or ethnic identity (or if she did it would be a neighbourhood identity). In the Chinatown of the host society, the identity will be one of urban mainland China origin (in contrast to Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong or Canton) but in the heartland of the host country the identity may become a more complex “pan-Asian” construct. The social context is essential in which identity is foreshadowed (ibid: 177-178).

One’s social identity, as Suárez-Orozco notes in the above excerpt, is shaped by the different geographic and national contexts inhabited by the individual depending on the availability of particular social identities. For example, as illustrated in the above excerpt, while living in China and before emigrating to the U.S. social context, where identity categories are different to those found in China, individuals habitually self-identify themselves in ethnic terms, such as having a Cantonese identity. However, upon their entry in the U.S. social context, their social identification is altered and even shaped by local contexts within the U.S. While in a China-town local context, one’s social identity becomes Chinese, whilst in other contexts a pan-ethnic ‘pan-Asian’ maybe adopted.
Suárez-Orozco (2004: 178) also noted that identity formation in the society of settlement is also dynamically shaped by the interplay between achieved identities and ascribed identities (imposed identities by the society of origin such as racial identities). Suárez-Orozco (2004: 178) made a distinction between the two types of identities. Achieved identities are identities that are voluntarily invoked by immigrants in their society of settlement such as identities based on one’s ethnic origins. Immigrants who assert such identities, according Suárez-Orozco (2004: 178), exhibit strong emotional/affective attachment to their ethnic identities. The immigrant, for example, formulates such self-identifications, ‘I am a member of this group.’ However, such identities tend to be flexible and contingent on social contexts and are not primordial in nature. On the other hand, ascribed identities, Suárez-Orozco (2004: 178) theorised, are externally imposed identities such as racial categories, imposed by members of the dominant host society on the immigrants. Ascribed identities could, for example, be in the form of ‘You are a member of that group’ (Suárez-Orozco (2004: 178)). How such immigrants respond to imposed identities also tends to be varied.

For Suárez-Orozco (2004: 175), some of the contexts that could shape the identity formations of immigrants are: (1) the intensity and nature of contact with culture of origin; (2) the intensity and contact with dominant culture; (3) the nature of reception by members of the host society; and (4) the perceptions and social representations of immigrants by the larger settlement society. According to Suárez-Orozco (2004: 175-176), as the frequency of contact with the culture of the host society intensifies, immigrants tend to develop attachment to and adoption of the social identities of the host society. Likewise, according to Suárez-Orozco (2004: 179), as immigrants frequently interact and live among their fellow ethnic people in an ethnic enclave, they tend to cling to their ethnic-based social identities, an argument also supported by Berry (1997). Furthermore, Suárez-Orozco (2004: 180) also noted that if members of the society of settlement are accepting of newcomers, immigrants tend to adopt social identities found in their new homeland. However, if members of the host society discriminate against the newcomers, immigrants distance themselves from identifying with social identities of their new society of settlement. Thus Suárez-Orozco (2004: 185) implies that immigrants’ self-identifications tend to be situational and are shaped by multiple structural factors found in their new homeland.

According to Suárez-Orozco (2004: 190-191), the identity formation of immigrants in host cultures tends to be in flux and incomplete and is characterised by multiple self-identificational pathways that could be defined and re-defined constantly.
Viewed from a social constructionist orientation, the perspective of Suárez-Orozco effectively captures and explains the fluid, contextually dependent and unpredictability of identity formation of immigrants in their new host societies. In doing so, Suárez-Orozco departs from positivist views of identify formation theories. Her perspective is important for my study in making sense the variegated, socially embedded and interactionally situated patterns of the identity formation of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa.

In summary, the different conceptual and theoretical frameworks discussed above are deployed in this study to explain the different facets of everyday, lived experiences of racialisation, as well as participants’ racial and ethnic identity formations and patterns of adaptation to South African racial identity categories. Next, I provide context and empirical literature on racialisation and racial/ethnic self-identification practices of immigrants in their race-conscious societies of settlement.
CHAPTER THREE: CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction
In this chapter, I start with a discussion of the socio-cultural contexts of Eritrea and South Africa. I discuss the Eritrean socio-cultural context (ethnicity-based social stratification) from which Eritreans originate and the South African socio-cultural context (racialised social stratification) to which Eritreans immigrated. It is with this background in mind that the reader can be able to make sense of participants’ experiences of racialisation and their self-identification practices. Next, I cover the broader literature that focuses on the racialisation experiences of immigrants (Omi and Winant 1994) and their acculturation strategies (Berry 1997) to the racial identity categories found in their respective countries of settlement where the societies are racially organized and racial consciousness is pervasive. The formation of ethnic self-identification developed in the host society (Phinney 1990) for immigrants of diverse national origin is also reviewed. I then discuss literature on identity formation of Eritreans in other national contexts (namely in the U.S. and Italy) and research conducted on immigrant racialisation in the South African context.

The Eritrean Socio-Cultural Context
Eritrea: a post-colonial identity
Eritrea is a country located in North East Africa. Historically, according to Iyob (2005: 256) and Dirar (2007: 257), the notion of the ‘Eritrean’ national identity came into being with the official proclamation of Eritrea as an Italian colony in 1890. Prior to this defining moment, the present-day Eritrea comprised of many political territories controlled by chiefs with links to Ethiopia (Iyob 2005: 257; Dirar 2007: 257-259). Eritrean national identity, as an independent political identity, did not exist prior to the emergence of the Italian colonial foothold in the region.

The official declaration of Eritrea as a new Italian colony followed a treaty signed by Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia with Italy in the small town of Wuchale, Ethiopia in 1889 (Iyob 2005: 260). In this treaty, also known as ‘Wuchale Treaty’, Ethiopia ceded territories (territories forming the present day Eritrea) that had, prior to the treaty, links to Ethiopia to Italy in exchange for military equipment and financial assistance (Iyob 2005: 261). This was
immediately followed by delimitation of borders between the relinquished Ethiopian territories and the territories falling under the Ethiopian emperor. The Mereb River was used as a natural boundary that separated the two regions (Iyob 2005: 261).

This territorial demarcation along the Mereb River had subsequently created two separate identities: those that lived in the area north of the Mereb River were constructed as Eritreans by the Italian colonial state, and those that inhabited the area south of the river were integrated into Ethiopia (Iyob 2005: 261). The genesis of the modern state of Eritrea therefore was made possible as a product of an encounter with colonialism in the late 19th century. Dirar (2007: 258) noted that the Italian colonial state, subsequent to the creation of the colonial territory, persistently worked to entrench an Eritrean national identity ideology and consciousness through discourses that characterised Eritreans as ‘modern’ and ‘advanced’ people while downgrading Ethiopia as ‘feudalist’ and ‘backward’.

The Italian colonial state inherited an ethnically heterogeneous Eritrean society characterised by ethno-regional and ethno-linguistic differences (Dirar 2007: 164). Dirar also noted that the Italian colonial state did not introduce imposed social classification systems based on race or colour (Dirar 2007: 15). The colonial state left untouched the previous self-identification systems based on regional attachments and ethno-linguistic belonging of the different social groupings in Eritrea.

What the Italian colonial state did was to allocate social hierarchies to the existing ethno-linguistic groups (Dirar 2007: 164-165). For example, Dirar (2007: 164) noted that during the Italian colonial period, the Tigrinya ethnic group (speakers of a language of Semitic origin) were positioned at the top of the ethno-linguistic ladder. Other Eritrean languages of Kushitic origin such as Saho, Afar and Bilin occupied a second position and finally the Kunama and Nara ethnic groups of Nilotic linguistic origin at the lowest of the ethno-linguistic hierarchy. However, in the pre-colonial encounter, Dirar (2007: 167) and Naty (2001: 575) argued that such ethnic groups existed as almost mutually exclusive entities with little contact with each other. With the construction of a national ‘Eritrean’ identity by the Italian colonial administration and the subsequent integration of the ethnicities, a hierarchical relationship was created between the ethnic groups.

After the Italians left Eritrea in 1941, the British took over Eritrea and administered the country for ten years. By the time the British arrived in the country, the Eritrean national identity constructed by the Italian colonial state had already solidified among Eritreans (Trevaskis 1960 cited in Sorenson 1990: 299). Subsequently, after the British left, Eritrea was federated with its neighbouring Ethiopia in 1950 by a UN resolution. However, in 1962
Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia unilaterally annexed Eritrea to Ethiopia claiming that ‘Eritrea had always been a part of Ethiopia before the colonial encounter and that it had now finally reunited with its ‘mother’ Ethiopia’ (Sorenson 1990: 299). This decision by Ethiopia to annex Eritrea to Ethiopia, as one of its provinces, provoked resistance by a number of Eritrean nationalists and, as Sorenson (1990: 299) noted, the resistance to the annexation was based on the logic of the maintenance of an independent Eritrean national identity which was created by the Italian colonial state in the late 19th century. Such opposition escalated to an armed struggle to reclaim an independent Eritrean national identity and the war that lasted thirty years (Petras and Morley 1984 cited in Sorenson 1990: 299).

During the armed struggle, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) (the organisation that waged the armed struggle) further consolidated the Eritrean national identity by amplifying a discourse of a unified Eritrean national identity and equality of all ethno-linguistic groupings and subsuming the ethno-linguistic, regional- and clan-based self-identifications under the over-arching ‘Eritrean’ national identity (Kibreab 2000: 257; Bereketeab 2002: 139; Dirar 2007: 257). Furthermore, the authors argued that the resultant armed struggle for independence (from 1960s to 1991) brought together the disparate ethno-linguistic groups to view themselves as members of a supra-ethnic ‘Eritrean’ national identity in order to come together as a unified force to drive out a common ‘colonial enemy’: Ethiopia (Bereketeab 2002: 139).

However, despite the rhetoric of equality of all Eritrean ethno-linguistic groups by the EPLF, the leadership was predominantly comprised of the Tigrinya ethnic group (Woldemikael 1993: 16; Iyob 1995: 44; Bereketeab 2000: 33). Eventually the EPLF took control of the whole country in 1991 and Eritrea was official recognised by the United Nations as an independent state through a popular referendum in 1993. After the establishment of Eritrea as a sovereign state, ethno-linguistic-based social stratification still characterises the country.

In terms of contemporary social stratification, the Tigrinya ethnic group is politically, economically and culturally dominant (Bereketeab 2000: 36; Naty 2001: 575). The current political elites were constituted during the struggle for independence which was largely composed of the Tigrinya ethnic group (Woldemikael 1993: 19; Iyob 1995: 48; Bereketeab 2000: 43). The other ethnic groups have largely been excluded from wielding political and economic influence (Bereketeab 2000: 34; Naty 2001: 576; Dirar 2007: 258). The Tigrinya ethnicity still occupies the highest visibility in Eritrea. For example, the current government uses Tigrinya to be a common administrative language spoken by bureaucrats across the
country effectively subjugating all languages under the hegemonic Tigrinya language (Naty 2001: 579; Dirar 2007: 259).

Given the pre-independence, 1991, Eritrea’s historical ties with Ethiopia, it is pertinent to also briefly outline and discuss social stratification systems in Ethiopia more broadly in relation to Eritrea’s. After the forced incorporation of Eritrea into greater Ethiopia in 1962 until independence in 1991, Eritrea’s society and history had been intertwined with Ethiopia’s social-hierarchical arrangement and historical domination of certain ethno-linguistic groups over other minorities in the country (Teshale 1995). Ethno-linguistic social groups in Eritrea and Ethiopia involve hierarchical stratification in which largely the Tigrinya group based in Eritrea and Ethiopia and the Amhara speaking (predominantly Christian) group based in Ethiopia have historically and in contemporary Eritrea and Ethiopia dominated socially, culturally, economically and politically other ethno-linguistic groups in Eritrea and Ethiopia at different times (Teshale 1995; Dirar 2007; Jalata 2009). The Amhara had been a dominant force in the present-day Eritrea and current Ethiopia before the Tigrinya-dominated guerrilla organizations came to political power in Eritrea (the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front) and Ethiopia (the Tigriyan People’s Liberation Front) in 1991 (Woldemikael 1993; Teshale 1995; Bereketeab 2000; Jalata 2009; Hailu 2016). Therefore, the Tigrinya and Amharic ethno-linguistic groups (both argued to be Semitic-origin peoples), have alternately ruled and subjugated minority ethnic groups found in present day Eritrea and Ethiopia. Social stratification and domination in both Eritrea and Ethiopia are not only based on language differentiation, but in the social world, ideas of phenotypic distinctions form a basis for social prejudice and discrimination. For example, in Ethiopia, non-Semitic, non-Christian groups, the dark skinned Nilotic groups located in the Southern part of Ethiopia, experience negative stereotyping and discrimination and treated as inferior by members of Semitic-speaking Amhara and Tigrinya groups (Hailu 2016: 55-56). The Eritrea case appears to be somewhat of an exception in which, for example, the Rashaida ethnic group who are nomads are of a lighter skin colour, and the Bilen, Saho and the Tigre have physical appearance almost similar to most members of the Tigrinya ethnic group. Such groups do not experience prejudice and discrimination by the Tigrinya group based on their phenotype but based on their way of life and the association of their cultural traditions with being ‘backward’. Domination, in the context of Eritrea, therefore, takes economic, cultural and political forms (Naty (2001: 575; Dirar 2007: 167). Notions of superiority also play out within the Tigrinya ethnic group. Those who live in Asmara, the Capital City, refer to themselves as ‘Asmarinos’ and they refer to those who live in the villages ‘Hagereseb’. The
term ‘Asmarino’ is invoked by individuals who were born in Asmara, who insert some Italian words in their Tigrinya (a sign of being ‘modern’) and who dress in a ‘modern’ way. The Hagereseb are seen as individuals that are still ‘backward’ and ‘not-modern-enough’.

In terms of religion, the majority of members of the Tigrinya ethnic group are Christians while the rest of the ethnic groups are predominantly Muslims with some who practice animism. The predominantly Christian Tigrinya ethnic group occupies the highest place in the social hierarchy of the country (Woldemikael 1993: 22; Naty 2001: 578).

As the above discussions of social stratification systems in Eritrea illustrate, even though for Eritreans race-based social stratification structure is new, notions of hierarchy and domination are not necessarily new to Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers located in post-apartheid South Africa.

**Ethnicity-based social stratification systems**

Eritrea is composed of a heterogeneous ethnic groupings with self-identification systems based on ethno-linguistic group, clan, attachment to a geographic region and village of origin (See Kibreab 2000: 255; Bereketeab 2002: 138-139; Dirar 2007: 257. Broadly, there are nine ethno-linguistic groups recognised by the state of Eritrea, they are Rashaida, Saho, Tigre, Tigrinya, Afar, Bilien, Hedareb, Kunama and Nara. These linguistic social identities are located in relatively distinguishable geographic regions. For example, the Rashaida inhabit the North-Eastern Red Sea coastlines. The Bilien occupy the central region of the country. The Hidarib are located in the North-Western part bordering Sudan. The Tigre are located in the Western part and the Kunama and Nara ethnic groups are found in the South-Western bordering Ethiopia. The Tigrinya are located in the Central and Eastern part of the country occupying a large area. The Saho are in the Eastern part and the Afar live along the Red Sea coastal line on the South-Eastern part of the country.

Within each linguistic group, people further self-identify in terms of village of origin and clan (Bereketeab 2002: 139). Some of the known clans in Eritrea are Beni Amer, Asaorta, Beit Juk, Hedareb, Maria, Mensa and Minafere. One’s actual or imagined founding ancestors are the symbol of self-identification for members of the clans (Kibreab 2000: 258). In other words one is marked as different based on which ethno-linguistic group, region, village of origin or lineage membership one belongs to, rather than race-based physical appearance, such as skin colour, hair texture or other bodily features.

Furthermore, Bereketeab (2002: 139) noted that, in addition to self-identifications practices based on ethno-linguistic, ethno-regional and lineage, an ‘Eritrean’ national identity
and a cultural identity as ‘Habesha’ (Pankhurst 2001:6-7; Habecker 2012: 1203) are salient forms of self-identification for members of the Eritrean Diaspora and even for those who reside in the country.

The Habesha identity
The Tigrinya ethnic group in Eritrea is associated with a Habesha identity, an identity largely claimed by members of the Semitic-origin ethno-linguistic groups found in both Eritrea and Ethiopia such as Tigrinya (an ethnic group found both in Eritrea and Ethiopia) and Amhara and Guragie (ethnic groups found in Ethiopia) (Pankhurst 2001:6; Habecker 2012: 1203). The Habesha identity is ideologically associated with ideas of a culturally and historically unique people (Pankhurst 2001: 6-7; Habecker 2012: 1203). When the present day Eritrea had had links with Ethiopia, and before the creation of an Eritrea identity by the Italian colonial state in the late nineteenth-century, members of the Tigrinya-speaking ethno-linguistic group found in present-day Eritrea saw themselves as Habesha (Habecker 2012).

This unique self-identification, descriptive of ethno-linguistic groupings of Semitic-origin found in Eritrea and Ethiopia, is still claimed by members of the Tigrinya ethnic group in Eritrea to define themselves as a unique people (Pankhurst 2001: 6). For example, this identity is claimed by the Tigrinya ethnic group found in Eritrea and Ethiopia and the Ethiopia-based Amhara and Guragie ethnic groups as a way to distinguish themselves from imposed racial identities such as black in the U.S. (Habecker 2012). The Habesha identity is associated with ideas of historical pride linked to an ancient civilisation of the Axumite Kingdom that existed in the region including present-day Eritrea. Habeshaness is also associated with having links to ancient biblical figures such as King Solomon and Sheba (Sorenson 1993; Pankhurst 2001: 8). The cultural identity of being Habesha also refers to pride in one’s unique cultural traditions assumed to be peculiar to Eritrea and Ethiopia (Pankhurst 2001: 8).

Therefore, the refugees and asylum-seekers living in South Africa originate from a social classification system and self-identification practices based on non-racialised social identities. In other words, the body and its features are given less emphasis in self-identifying oneself and identifying others in Eritrea.

It follows, then, from the above synoptic view of the social classification system and self-identification practices based in Eritrea that the racial categories in South Africa, namely white, coloured, indian, and black are absent in the country of origin from which the Eritrean
refugees and asylum-seekers originate. For example, there are a range of physical/phenotypic variations within the Tigrinya ethnic group (which comprises the sample of this study), but they are not marked as carrying any racial meanings. I argue that, Eritreans do not perceive each other in terms of colour-based identities. This fact creates, I argue, a clash of identities when Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers first enter the domain of the race-conscious South African society. How Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers adjust in their everyday life to South African racial self-identification, therefore, merits investigation which this study aims to address.

**The meanings of skin colour in Eritrea**

In the socio-cultural world and imaginary of the Tigrinya-speaking ethnic group in Eritrea, who comprise all of the study participants in this project, skin colour is used to merely describe the appearance of individuals, not a group of individuals in the form of a category connoting race (Kaplan 1999). For example, Eritreans back home in Eritrea and even here in South Africa describe me (in Tigrinya) as ‘ቀይሕ’/‘keyih’ (‘red-skinned’). For a woman, the description for ‘red-skinned’ is “ቀያሕ”/ ‘keyah’. The term ‘ከዯራይ’/’kederay’ (‘brown-skinned’) describes a male person and ‘ከዯረይቲ’/ ‘kedereyti’ describes a female person. The adjective ‘አስለም’/ ‘tselim’ (‘dark-skinned’) describes a male person while for a female person, the terms used is ‘አስሊም/’tselam’. Such descriptions merely describe individuals’ skin tones and do not refer to group identities.

There are no social meanings attached to individuals bearing a particular skin colour (as in racial categories). There have not been, historically and in contemporary Eritrea, social classification/stratification systems based on one’s skin colour. There are no groups, in Eritrea, divided along the boundary of physical characteristics. Skin colour is simply a tool used by ordinary Eritreans to describe an individual’s appearance. As I have outlined above, the sense of group belonging in Eritrea is based largely on ethno-linguistic group, ethno-regional location and village of origin (they do not point to differences in physical appearance) (Kibreab 2000: 257; Bereketeab 2002: 139; Dirar 2007: 257).
The South African Socio-Cultural Context

Race in pre-Apartheid

According to scholars, historically, race has not been considered a rigid organising principle in South Africa. Its salience only grew progressively stronger with the passage of time (MacDonald 2006: 46). For example, as Maylam (2001: 23) suggested, race had not been an institutionally visible feature of the South African society during the early period of European colonisation. In the early days, when the Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 and set up a colony, they were aware of the differences in physical appearance between themselves and the indigenous people they encountered (Frederickson 1981: 19; Cell 1982: 55). Despite this fact, as Frederickson (1981: 21) and Maylam (2001:24) noted, the settlers did not view such differences important enough to strictly organise communities around physical differences even in the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, as Maylam (2001: 26) noted, there were extensive marriages between white men and black women and co-existence of peoples of all physical appearances (Frederickson 1981: 32). Keegan (1996: 8) and Maylam (2001: 27) related that, in the 18th century, the notion of superiority of European settlers in the Cape Colony over the indigenous people was not based on race but religion and culture.

Even if indigenous South Africans largely were subordinated to whites in many spheres, until the late 18th century, race and racial categories did not function as an explicit organising principle in the Dutch-controlled Cape Colony. However, with the gradual settlement and control by the British of the Cape in 1806 (Beinart and Dubow 1995: 9-12), they brought with them notions of race-based social organisation (Frederickson 1981: 27). For example, the construction of the category ‘free blacks’ in the 1807 census was one of the first attempts to institutionalise racial categories (Frederickson 1981: 29). In 1860, with the establishment of Boer republics in the Central, Northern and Eastern parts of South Africa emerged institutional racial discrimination through the constitution and policy, subordinating blacks under white domination (Frederickson 1981: 28; Cell 1982: 61).

According to Cell (1982: 63), in the Cape, under the British rule, non-racialism and equality of all racial groups and assimilationist and liberal policies were practiced in the area, and the relative absence of formal racial segregation. However, in the Natal Colony, the British exercised racial segregation policies due to the preponderance of blacks in the Colony and the perceived threat to the rule (Frederickson 1981: 33; Cell 1982: 63). In Natal, under
British rule, and the Boer republics under the Afrikaner government, the two states institutionalised social divisions and segregations based on race.

With the discovery of diamonds in the 1870s and gold in 1886, the need for a race-based labour system was established effectively relegating black labour to subordinate position to the white elite economic establishment (Frederickson 1981: 35; Keegan 1996: 8-9). This was done to produce cheap African labour for the mining industry. After the British and the Afrikaner formed a union government in 1910, race and racial discrimination became a salient feature of the state through the passage of a series of laws between 1911 and 1920s (Frederickson 1981: 35-37; Keegan 1996: 10). In 1911, according to Frederickson (1981: 34), the Mines and Works Act segregated jobs along racial lines in mines and railroads. In 1913, the Natives Land Act divided land in South Africa along racial groups allocating a substantial part of land to white South Africans while limiting the majority of South Africans to designated reserves. Frederickson (1981: 36-37) also noted that, in 1920, the Native Affairs Act established Native Councils to govern black South Africans in their designated areas. In 1923, the Native Urban Areas Act delineated urban areas for whites and controlled the ‘influx’ of black men from entering such areas without passes (Frederickson 1981: 37).

In 1927, the Immorality Act prohibited sexual relations between whites and blacks (Frederickson 1981: 38; Cell 1982: 62; Beinart and Dubow 1995:10). The state also imposed racial segregation policies in areas such as transportation, health, education and the recreation sector, among others (Beinart and Dubow 1995: 11). Blacks during this time were generally disenfranchised and their representation in parliament curtailed (Frederickson 1981: 35). Therefore, largely the South African society had been racially organised during the Union Government period until 1948, the onset of Apartheid government.

However, racial categories during this period were not explicitly defined and demarcated (Posel 2001a). For example, the categories coloured and black were not clearly defined in law even if the Union Government had made a general distinction between the two racial categories (Frederickson 1981: 37; Posel 2001a: 94). During this period, in everyday life, one’s racial identity was a reflection of social standing and mode of living coupled with physical appearance (Posel 2001a: 94). For everyday ordinary South Africans, that people could move between racial categories depending on their social and economic status, effectively allowing, for example those identified as coloured, to pass as white as their social standing improved (Posel 2001a: 90).

Therefore, the racial formation in South Africa was not consistent, historically. Posel (2001a: 89-90) notes that, racial classification before the Apartheid state (1948), was not
consistently applicable to various population groups and was replete with ambiguities and vagueness. For example, different provinces applied different criteria for assigning individuals into racial categories, according to Posel (2001a: 89-90), such as criteria based on descent, appearance, general acceptance, repute and mode of living (Suzman 1960 cited in Posel 2001a: 90). Hence, historically in South Africa, racial classification was not uniformly applied to populations but employed in varied ways using arbitrary criteria to ascribe racial identities to individuals.

As a response to such ambiguity in racial classification, the Apartheid state rigidly institutionalised and strictly policed a racial classification system. Despite the ambiguities in racial classification and the prevalence of inter-racial relations, the segregationist policies of the Union Government had laid the foundation for the stringent policies of separation between the races in the subsequent years.

**Race under Apartheid (1948-1994)**

The ascent of the National Party to power in 1948 saw the classification of the South African society into rigid racial categories and the policing of such racial categories that were previously more permeable and malleable (Posel 2001a). According to Posel (2001a: 97), the rationale for the introduction of rigid racial categories was to curb the increasing black entry into urban areas, alleged rising crime levels, fear of organized black uprisings, and to curb interracial sexual relations and marriages. The rigid racial classification and its policing was in response to the relatively soft racial segregation policy adopted by pre-Apartheid states and instead introduced a set of laws that prohibited any form of inter-racial contact in many spheres (Frederickson 1981: 35; Posel 2001a: 92; Clark and Worger 2004: 44). The state through its Population Registration Act in 1950, constructed and defined three racial categories namely white, coloured, and native [black African] and required every South African to be racialised according to non-scientific popular perception and appearance; the indian racial category was later included in the mix (Posel 2001a: 56). The Apartheid state defined the racial categories as follows:

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 (Posel 2001a: 56).

The rationale, according to Posel (2001: 98), behind such classification was to preserve white racial ‘purity’ and the Act introduced uniformity in categorisation of persons into particular races, effectively segmenting the general population into white, coloured, Indian, and black as distinct and rigid racial categories. Such classification was given expression, for example, through the distribution of identity documents bearing racial identities of identity holders (Posel 2001a: 98). A person’s racial identity was determined by his appearance and social conventions (Posel 2001a: 102).

Once a person’s racial category was determined by the Apartheid state, every aspect of that person’s life was already defined. For example: where they lived, what job they could do, which schools they could go, public facilities they could use, who they could have sexual relations with and marry, and whether they had a right to vote (Christopher 2001: 320; Posel 2001a: 96; Winant 2001: 88).

In the hierarchical construction of the racial categories in South Africa, each racial category was imbued with meanings. Historically, in the apartheid state ideology, whiteness functioned as a social identity of power, privilege and purity (see Melissa Steyn 2008: 30-34). Compared to the other categories, whiteness was constructed to occupy a higher social status, economic privilege and political power (Posel 2001a: 91; Steyn 2008: 31).

The coloured identity, as Aletta Norval (1996: 119) and Grant Farred (2000: 55) argued, occupied a ‘midfield’ between the black racial category, on the one hand, and white racial category on the other. As Norval (1996: 119) put it, coloureds were politically conditioned to occupy a middle position between white and black.

For Farred (2000:1), the coloured racial identity connoted a racial grouping that was an outcome of miscegenation and hybridity and was associated with being ‘impure’ both by the Apartheid state ideology and public discourse. This ideological belief about the coloured identity in South Africa, according to Farred, emanated from the Apartheid state’s exaltation of supposed ‘purity’ over mixing. Another scholar, Zimitri Erasmus (2001: 13), described the in-between and vague position of the meaning of colouredness by saying: ‘I was not only not ‘white’, but less than ‘white’; not only not ‘black’, but better than ‘black’’. Erasmus in the above statement argues that being coloured is seen as occupying a social position better than being black, in South Africa, but occupying a subordinate social standing to whiteness.
The Indian racial category, also relative to the black racial category, was positioned in a hierarchically favourable place (Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 23).

However, despite the intermediary position the coloured and Indian racial categories occupied in the apartheid racial hierarchy, and the better condition relative to black South Africans, their subordination to white racial category was made explicit by racist policies against them. Such policies included the Group Areas Act that forcibly dismantled members of the Indian and coloured communities from their habitual places of residence, and moved them into neighbourhoods allocated by the Apartheid state (Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 23-25).

The meaning of a black racial identity was associated, as Posel (2001b: 55) argued, with shame and inferiority and suffered systematic segregation and imposed isolationism under the Apartheid state, that relegated them to economic hardship and social stigma. Due to such negative connotations attached to the black racial category, there was a strong tendency for some individuals to prefer being identified as non-black (Posel 2001b: 56).

In the late 1950s, Robert Sobukwe and others emerged with an Africanist ideology (an ideology which exclusively stood for the indigenous people of Africa to the exclusion of other racial groups) and formed the Pan African Congress by breaking away from the African National Congress (ANC) (Sobukwe 1959). The ANC, at the time, had non-racial and multi-racial policies embracing the diverse South African racial groups in its movement. The PAC, spearheaded by Sobukwe advocated ‘Africa for Africans’ (indigenous black Africans) that called for the return of South Africa to indigenous black Africans (Sobukwe 1959). Sobukwe’s notion of black therefore exclusively referred to black South Africans and did not include Indians and coloureds (Sobukwe 1959) as was the case in Steve Biko’s notion of blackness.

In the 1970s, a politically-motivated and reactive black racial identity that did not associate blackness with Apartheid-based racial classifications, known as ‘Black Consciousness’ emerged. Drawing on ideas from American-based black movements, this movement emerged in response to phenotype-based racial classification of South Africans by the Apartheid government and advocated for a broadly-based black political identity (Hirschmann 1990: 3). Biko (1987: 48) defined black as ‘Being black is not a matter of pigmentation…’ The movement, largely spearheaded by Steve Biko, sought to bring together those Apartheid-identified as Indian, coloured and black under one all-encompassing racial rubric as black against oppression by the white-dominated government (Fatton 1986; Biko 1987: 39; Hirschmann 1990). According to this political identity of blackness, the aim of
fashioning a broad-based racialised identity was as a strategy of solidarity of all non-white social groups of all physical appearance against white domination (Biko 1987: 39). To emphasise solidarity of non-whites in South Africa Biko noted that ‘In an effort to maintain our solidarity and relevance to the situation, we must resist all attempts at the fragmentation of our resistance.’ (Biko 1987: 39). Such notion of blackness has been influential among anti-Apartheid political actors and ordinary South Africans living in the 1980s and 90s (Hirschmann 1990; Gibson 2004). Therefore, this discourse on black consciousness influenced South Africans to reject Apartheid-based and phenotype-conscious self-identification practices (as African/native, indian and coloured) in favour of a trans-phenotypic political blackness (Hirschmann 1990: 7).

**The everyday common sense aspects of Apartheid’s racial identities**

Posel (2001a, 2001b), argued that it was difficult for the Apartheid state to delineate precisely the racial category of a person biologically. For instance, it was hard to determine the ancestral history of each person concerned. As a result, the state combined biological notions (physical appearance) with social factors, such as, among others, language spoken, social class, social associations and how the person in question was racially perceived by the community (Posel 2001b: 59). In other words, the logic of racial classification by the Apartheid state heavily relied upon the common sense knowledge of racial categorisation by ordinary South Africans and state-appointed local racial classifiers who were entrusted with assigning a racial identity to subjects based on their common knowledge of who belonged to which racial category (Posel 2001a: 92; 2001b: 61).

However, as (Posel 2001b: 61-62) suggested, the classification of persons into racial categories was fraught with inconsistencies. For example, in determining the racial identity of a racially ambiguous person, classifiers used phenotypic characteristics of the person, such as hair texture, facial features and skin colour. Such measures were, however, applied inconsistently at different times, eventually creating an inconsistent system of racial categorisation of persons.

One of the highly ambiguous and contested racial categories that posed serious problems for racial classifiers, when adjudicating to which racial group to categorise, was the coloured category. Under Apartheid, the coloured category was, to begin with, constructed and defined vaguely. In the Population Registration Act (1950), a coloured person is defined as: a person who is not a white person or a native [black]. On numerous occasions, ‘a pencil
test’⁷ was used to determine whether to classify the person as white or coloured. Therefore, (Posel 2001b) notes that interestingly the Apartheid state:

allowed – indeed encouraged – classifiers spared of any pretence at scientific rigor, to read ‘race’ as a symptom of prevailing hierarchies of privilege and opportunity, and thereby make racial classifications that perpetuated and justified these common sense ‘conventions’ of difference (ibid. 68).

Even if the racial classification system was imprecise and lacked scientific justification, the Apartheid state delegated full authority to the racial classifiers to determine, through widely accepted social convention, who belonged to which racial category. Posel (2001a: 107) interestingly noted that the majority of classification cases were accepted as uncontested by those racially classified due to the fact that racial classification were largely based on social conventions; the classified individuals accepted what they knew was a social fact. However, Posel (2001b: 66) stated that in the minority of cases, those who lodged a complaint of mis-categorisation alluded to the common-sense version of racial categorisation in their defence, and pointed to the racial classifiers as persons who deviated from the social conventions in categorising them racially. Therefore, the logic of the Population Registration Act, in defining racial categories, was largely consonant with the everyday notions of ordinary South Africans.

**Petty Apartheid**
The Apartheid state, in its endeavour to restrict interracial contact and relations introduced an elaborate set of laws. The composite name of the series of acts also popularly known as ‘petty Apartheid’ were formed to accentuate racial segregation by maintaining social and physical distance between members of the socio-politically created racial categories in everyday life. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and Immorality Act (1950) prohibited sexual contact and marriages between members of the racial categories (Frederickson (1981:35; Guelke 2005: 12). The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) segregated facilities

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⁷ A pencil test is Apartheid’s practice of pushing a pencil through a person’s hair to determine the texture of the hair and to decide whether to classify a person as white or coloured.
and public services such as, *inter alia*, buses, libraries, beaches, swimming pools, train couches (Guelke 2005: 12). Superior amenities were allocated to whites while, relatively, inferior amenities were allocated to non-whites (Frederickson 1981; Guelke 2005: 13). Frederickson (1981: 37) related that petty Apartheid effectively racially organised the South African society in terms of the maintenance of interracial distance and subsequently influenced how members of the categorised racial groups related with each other even if the laws were later repealed.

**Apartheid as an ethnicisation project**

The Apartheid state could also be viewed, to some extent, as an ethnicisation project as much as it was a racialisation project. This was evidenced by its concept and practice of ‘Separate Development’, around the mid-twentieth century, designating particular ‘Homelands’ for the establishment of separately governed ‘independent’ states run by ethnic black Africans (Beinart and Dubow 1995: 12; Aletta Norval 1996: 117; Maylam 2001: 28). As Norval (1996: 118) put it succinctly, the Apartheid state ‘held that the most important ethnic groups should each be drawn together territorially so that each could develop as separate national units.’ Such logic of governance by separation through ethnic divisions was a characteristic feature of the Apartheid state.

All in all, ten separate ethnic homelands were constructed namely: Bophuthatswana, Transkei, KwaZulu, Ciskei, Venda, KwaNdebele, Gazankulu, KaNgwane, Lebowa, and QwaQwa (Butler 1978). The abovementioned Homelands were allocated for specific ethnic groups. For instance, Qwa Qwa was designated for Basothos; Venda only for Vendas; Ciskei and Transkei homelands were designated only for the Xhosa people. Gazankulu was for Shangaan and Tsonga people. Bophuthatswana was allocated only for the Tswana people. Lebowa homeland for the Pedi and Northern Ndebele and KwaZulu was designated only for Zulu people (Butler 1978:41; Beinart and Dubow 1995: 12; Maylam 2001: 29).

This practice of keeping the diverse ethnic groups separate by creating separate states for designated ethnic group/s was an extension of Apartheid’s racial division project (Butler 1978: 45). This separation of ethnic groups into designated areas, Butler (1978: 47) argued, was to deprive black South Africans citizenship of the South African state and monitor their movements in and out of major city centres. As Norval (1996: 124) put it, the concern of Apartheid was with ‘controlling the ‘influx’ of Africans into the cities’. The Apartheid state declared four of the ethnic homelands to be ‘independent’ states: Bophuthatswana in 1977, Transkei in 1976, Ciskei in 1981 and Venda in 1979. The purpose was to systematically
isolate all black South Africans from the then white-dominated South Africa proper (Maylam 2001: 29). Maylam (2001) notes that, even if the Apartheid state was also involved in separating the ethnic groups, its main preoccupation and project was with racial separation.

Yet, at the same time, the state subsumed all blacks that were culturally and linguistically heterogeneous ethnic groups under a single catch-all racial label native or black, systematically excluding all those who fell under this racial label from white South Africa. The ethnicisation project was also further evidenced when the Apartheid state, in 1951, subdivided the coloured racial category into ethnic groups namely: Indian, Malay and Chinese sub groups (Norval 1996: 130).

When the Apartheid racial system was officially dissolved, the next government, the African National Congress (ANC) adopted ‘non-racialism’, a state ideology against notions and practices of racial hierarchy and the insistence on equality of all persons regardless of their differences. However, race thinking in everyday social life and racial categorising (maintaining Apartheid-era racial categories) at institutional bureaucratic level continue to characterise the post-Apartheid South Africa (Posel 2001b: 55-57; Neville Alexander 2006: 3-7).

**Race in post-Apartheid South Africa (since 1994)**

Despite the dissolution of the official Apartheid State imposed racial hierarchy, race continued to be significant both for ordinary South Africans and bureaucratically at the state level (Posel 2001b: 109; Neville Alexander 2006: 3). In post-Apartheid South Africa, Apartheid-era racial categories are used for redress and equity purposes in census forms and statistical data as ‘population groups’ and in numerous bureaucratic forms explicitly stated as races (Posel 2001b; Louw 2004: 15; Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 45).

The basis for the continuity of racial categories in post-Apartheid South Africa is the new South African Constitution based on liberal-democracy ideals (Venter 2010), which made provision for previously disadvantaged groups such as South Africans racialised as black African to redress past racial inequality (Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 45-48). However, racial categorisation is no more externally imposed by state agents, but individuals have the agency to self-racialise themselves. Different affirmative action and redress programs such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) are some of the examples that employed race as a way to select black/ African (Also coloured and indian) South Africans for opportunities (Maré 2001: 92; Posel 2001a: 109-110).
Such programs have catapulted a significant number of black South Africans (20 percent) into the middle class economic stratum, hence the emergence of black middle-class in the previously white neighbourhoods (Louw, 2004: 57; Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 35-36; Seekings 2008: 19-23). However, despite the socio-economic mobility of a few black South Africans, South Africa still remains a racially stratified society in a wide range of areas (Clark and Worger 2004: 74; Louw 2004: 18; Seekings and Nattrass 2005: 38). For example, the great majority of black South Africans are still located at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy in post-Apartheid South Africa. They live largely in poorly resourced townships and informal shack settlements compared to other racial groupings as a direct result of Apartheid’s legacy (Christopher 2001: 315; Winant 2004: 23).

One of the indicators of social stratification of the South African society in post-Apartheid South Africa is average annual household income. According to Statistics South Africa (2012), considering the average annual household income by population group, there is high levels of inequality across population groups. The 2011 average annual household income for white South Africans was 387 011 followed by Indian/Asian South Africans, 252 724. For coloured South Africans, it was 139 190 followed by black South Africans who earned the lowest at 69 632. The income gap between white and black South Africans was big. On average, white-headed households earned 5.5 times the average annual income of black-headed households (Stats SA 2012).

Therefore, in terms of socio-economic stratification, the majority of white South Africans continue to be positioned at the highest level in the economic hierarchy, possessing a significant portion of material wealth, while the majority of black South Africans remain, relatively, in poor socio-economic conditions (Louw 2004: 18). Political power wise, however, after the demise of official Apartheid, the successive government has been dominated by black political elites. South Africa is therefore a politically black dominated and economically white controlled society. The salience of race and racial categories in post-Apartheid South Africa, therefore, has been reflected in both the continued use of racial categories in institutional spheres and the socio-economic stratification of the society along racial lines.

Posel (2001a) described the apparent contradiction between the policy of ‘non-racialism’ and the continued use of Apartheid-era racial categories:

Paradoxically, one of the principal legal instruments for redressing the racial imbalances of the apartheid past – the Employment Equity
Act (Act 55 of 1998) – reproduces the racial categories enacted in the Population Registration Act as the basis upon which affirmative action is to be instituted and measured (ibid.: 109-110).

Furthermore, speaking of the continuity of race-consciousness in post-Apartheid era, Posel (2001b: 55-57) and Neville Alexander (2006: 3-7) argue that, the formerly constructed racial identities continue to have relevance at the structural/state and interpersonal social interaction levels. The socio-politically constructed racial identities continue to have salience in both bureaucratic circles and the public at large, effectively reinvigorating past racialised identities and reinforcing race consciousness.

In the following quote, Posel (2001a) describes the ubiquitous status of racial consciousness in contemporary South Africa:

It is no surprise, then, that despite the repeal of the Population Registration Act, these racial categories are still writ large in the everyday life of the citizens of the ‘new’ South Africa. New debates and contestations on the subject of race have begun to proliferate. However, it remains the norm for articles and letters in the press, reports on radio and television, and other modes of conversation and commentary to identify social actors in racialised terms, attesting to the lingering salience of these racial constructions within social consciousness. There is little reason to suppose that they will atrophy spontaneously (ibid. 109).

This suggests that race is still a social reality in post-Apartheid South Africa and the official racial categories, which the Apartheid state used to categorise the South African population, have influenced how the public thinks about difference in racial terms. Given the continuity and salience of race and race-consciousness in post-Apartheid South Africa,

In the next section, I review the literature on the racialisation experiences and racial self-identification practices of immigrant groups, from diverse national origins, in their respective racially organised or race-conscious societies of settlement. I follow this with a literature review on racialisation experiences of Eritreans in the U.S. and Italy, and racialisation of immigrants in the South African context.
International Literature on the Racialisation of Immigrants

In this section, I review the body of work on the racialisation experiences (Omi and Winant 1994) of immigrants, how they adapt to the racial identity categories of their respective host countries (Berry 1997) and their formations of ethnic self-identifications (Phinney 1990). I therefore situate the empirical findings of my study within international empirical works conducted across various national contexts, as there are only a few studies available in the South African context.

As predominantly the empirical literature is located within the U.S. racial context, a great deal of the review will cover racialisation experiences of immigrants within the U.S. context.

Much of the scholarship on the racialisation experiences of immigrant communities comes from the U.S., while some studies were conducted in other national contexts. The literature that focused on the racial formation of immigrant communities in racially organised host societies, focuses on how immigrant groups, coming from different forms of social classification systems in their home countries, experienced racial categorisation by both members of the host societies and their institutions, and how they respond to their externally imposed racial categorisation.

For example, different immigrant groups responded to their racialisation in varied ways. Some reject imposed racial identification by the host society and preferred to self-identify based on their ethnicity (see Kaplan 1999; Chako 2003; Arriaza 2004; Kusow 2006; Kusow and Arjouch 2007; Yarbrough 2010; Vandeyar 2011; Asante 2012; Alemu 2012; Awokoya 2012; Habecker’s 2012; King Francis 2014). Some of those who originated from race-conscious cultures, showed preference to self-identify in terms of racial categories they were familiar with in their countries of origin, rather than a different set of race relations in their host society (McDonnell and Lourenco 2009; Bessa 2013).

Other immigrant groups embraced race-based identity categories in their host countries (see Foner 1985; Kusow and Arjouch 2007); still other immigrant groups adopted multiple self-identifications (see Water 1994; Landale and Oropesa 2002; Golash-Boza 2006; Itzigsohn, Giorguli and Vazquez 2006; Lewis 2007; Vasquez 2007; Abdulrahim 2008; Arnone 2011; Godfried Agyeman Asante 2012; Vargas-Ramos 2014).
Transitioning from one racialised society to another

Studies have indicated that in the case of immigrant groups who originated from race-based social-classification systems, responses to being re-racialised in ways consistent with the host-society’s race-relations were not uniform. Berry (1997: 11) indicated that adapting to identity categories in a host country tends to be difficult if immigrants come from societies with different social classification systems. Omi and Winant (1994: 16) also noted that immigrants may accept or resist self-identifying in terms of racial categories found in their host societies.

Through in-depth interviews, McDonnell and Lourenco (2009) explored Brazilian women’s experience of racialisation and adjustment to racial categories in the U.S. racial context. The study found that Brazilian women emphasized their national identity as ‘Brazilian’ and rejected their racialisation as black as well as ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latina’-categories found within the U.S. racial system. McDonnell and Lourenco (2009) argued that Brazilians emphasised their national origin-based self-identification as a devise to challenge the racial subordination that being racialised as a non-white implies in the U.S. racial order. The authors noted that the Brazilian immigrants originated from a Brazilian racial context in which a person’s racial identity tends to be unstable, fluid and contextually determined, hence the Brazilians found the U.S.-based racial categories too rigid to navigate.

In her doctoral thesis, Bessa (2013) used a phenomenological approach to explore how Brazilian immigrant women in the United States experienced and made sense of American racial identities and re-negotiated their Brazilian identities with which they were familiar. She found that even if the Brazilian immigrant women chose to self-identify as ‘morena’ — a racial category in Brazil denoting mixed-ness — and rejected an imposed black/African American racial category, they were constantly perceived and racialised as ‘African-Americans’ by the American society. Her participants experienced, therefore, a conflict between the desire to self-identify oneself in familiar identities found in Brazil and their externally imposed black racial identity in the U.S.

Conducted in another national context, Lewis (2007) analysed self-identification patterns of South African-born coloured immigrant women, originating from a racial identification system based on white, coloured, indian, and black categories, in Australia using an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Even if Australia does not collect census data by race, according to Lewis (2007), race consciousness still is pervasive in the public.

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8The common racial categories in Brazil, include Brancos (whites), Pardos (browns), Pretos (blacks), Amarelos (yellows) and Indigenous.
imagination and discourse. Within this context, Lewis’ results revealed that, the coloured South African immigrants self-identified in terms of a combination of racial and ethnic labels such as: coloured, black, mixed race, South African, and ‘South African-born Australian’. The surprising finding is that some of the participants self-identified themselves as black in Australia, a racial identity distinct from a coloured category in South Africa. The author argues that in Australia, first-generation immigrants tend to adopt a bi-cultural/integration self-identification strategy, as was proposed by Berry (1997: 8-9).

Vargas-Ramos (2014) carried out in-depth interviews with Puerto Ricans (originating from a racial identification system based on white, black, Asian, Amerindian, Mixed and Other) in the U.S. to explore how they self-identified in terms of their racial and ethnic identities. The findings revealed that children of Puerto Rican immigrants born in the United States and socialised into American race-relations, self-identified more as either black or ‘mixed-race’. Puerto Rican immigrants who entered the United States from Puerto Rico as adults, socialised in Puerto Rico’s racial context, self-identified themselves as white. Vargas-Ramos (2014) explained the disparity in the immigrants’ self-identification strategies as a result of the social context in which they were brought up. For the U.S.-born youth, their externally ascribed designation as black informed their sense of identity, even if they were of lighter skin. Those who immigrated to the U.S. as adults and self-identified themselves as white in Puerto Rico, still self-identified as white, despite the American public perception of them as ‘not-white-enough’ immigrants.

Other studies on Puerto Rican and Mexican immigrants in the U.S. resulted in an interesting pattern of self-identification. The studies by Duany (1998) and Rodriguez, Clara and Cordero-Guzman (1992) found that Puerto Ricans and Mexicans perceived their racial identities in terms of a continuum, stretching from white to black rather than mutually exclusive rigid categories. For example, those Mexicans with European and Indian ancestry self-identified themselves as a ‘mestizo’, a category absent in the U.S., and experienced a dilemma when confronted to self-identify with a black/white racial binary in the U.S. racial context. However, Puerto Ricans were observed moving between different racial self-identifications in their everyday social interactions with local Americans demonstrating the dynamic nature and fluidity of racial identities with which they were familiar back home.

The above empirical findings illustrate that, the concept of race and racial categories are socio-cultural constructs with different meanings attached to them in different geographic regions (Omi and Winant 1994: 14; Goldberg 2006: 234-237). When immigrants, therefore, transition from one racial order to another, a conflict arises between their familiar notions of
racial categories in their countries of origin, and a new set of racial categories they encounter in their host societies. The studies above show that, largely, immigrants who emigrate as adults tend to maintain a separation strategy (Berry 1997: 9), committed to their self-identification practices which they brought from home. It should be noted that the separation strategy does not only surface because of immigrants’ choice; instead, such a path is also possible due to xenophobia and racism which immigrants face in the larger society of settlement. In addition to structural/institutional factors, transnational contacts of immigrants also inform immigrants’ maintenance of their home-land identities (Peter: 2001).

For immigrants coming from a non-racialised social classification systems and self-identification practices, the experiences are varied. Many prefer maintaining their ethnicity-based self-identification rather than race-based self identifications found in their countries of settlement. For some others, self-identifications tend to be shaped by the social contexts in which they found themselves or identified as both in terms of their ethnicity and racial identities. Others chose to self-identify in terms of racial categories they have encountered in their host society for strategic reasons.

**Resisting racialisation**

An immigration scholar, Chako (2003), investigated, using in-depth interviews, the ethnic and racial identities of children of first-generation Ethiopian immigrants in the United States. The findings showed that such immigrants showed strong identifications with their ethnic identities as ‘Ethiopians’ and distanced themselves from the black or African-American racial identity, under which they were officially categorised in the U.S. racial classification system. Chako explained that their everyday close ties with their ethnic communities influenced these immigrants to have a strong attachment to their Ethiopian national identity and culture despite being native-born Americans. A similar study, by Alemu (2012), also showed that Ethiopian immigrants living in Atlanta, U.S.A., resisted being categorised as blacks by the American society, but instead preferred to self-identify by their national origin as ‘Ethiopians’.

In other settings, beyond the U.S. social context, Ethiopians too have been observed resisting forms of racial identities such as a study by Kaplan (1999). Kaplan (1999), interviewed Ethiopians-Jews living in Israel to explore to what extent the Ethiopians internalised their imposed racialisation by members of the Israeli communities as ‘black Jews’. His results showed that Ethiopians in Israel strongly resisted being identified as
‘blacks’, ‘black Jews’, or ‘Cushim’, a label ascribed by the racial order in Israel to ‘African Americans’, ‘Africans’, and ‘Ethiopian Christians’ in Israel (Kaplan 1999: 550). Kaplan (1999) argued that the racial identity ‘black’, in Israel carries a negative and derogatory meaning that the Ethiopian-Israelis distanced themselves from, and instead self-identified as ‘Jews’ rather than be identified by a racial label.

In the U.S. context, Kusow (2006) and Kusow and Arjouch (2007) interviewed Somali-immigrants (who come from a social classification system based on clan) in Canada and the U.S. to explore how they responded to their imposed black racial identity. Their findings showed that Somalis in North America rejected their ascribed black racial identity; instead they self-identified in terms of their respective clans and national-origin as simply ‘Somali’.

Similar to such findings, drawing on interview data, another study by Arriaza (2004) of Central American immigrants, also found that immigrants originating from a social stratification system based on linguistic and cultural differentiation found it difficult to acculturate to U.S.-based racial categories and self-identification practices. The study participants, for example, did not prefer to be categorised as ‘Latino’ or ‘Hispanic’, a broad pan-ethnic category created in the U.S. to label immigrants of a diversity of Latin American countries. They also resisted being racially perceived as black in the U.S. The immigrants resisted being externally identified as black due to the subordinate racial position blackness connotes in the U.S. racial stratification order.

A doctoral thesis by King Francis (2014) employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the everyday racialisation experiences of international immigrant students originating from Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. The interview results showed that, the immigrants experienced racialisation as black both by members of the dominant U.S. society and by institutions due to their phenotype. The findings further showed that the meaning of blackness in their societies of origin have different social meanings than the stigmatised U.S.-based blackness that they are confronted with. The results by King Francis reveal that despite the immigrants’ phenotypic similarity to their African American counterparts in the U.S., the meanings attached to their skin colour and phenotype in their countries of origin culturally differed from those understood in the U.S. cultural context.

In another study, Clara Rodríguez (2000) investigated patterns of racial self-identification of immigrants of diverse Latin American origin on the U.S. census forms. Her analysis revealed that the majority of the immigrants, who originated from a system of social classification that is based on ethnicity, viewed the limited number of racial categories on the census as restrictive and avoided selecting the available standard racial categories presented
on the census forms; they instead chose to write in their national origin as a racial identifier. Despite a methodological determinism, which was based on a quantitative analysis of self-identification patterns, her findings are important in understanding the extent to which immigrants coming from a non-racialised social classification system resist self-identification in racial terms in their new society of settlement.

Multiple self-identifications

In the case of immigrants transitioning from a non-racialised society to a racialised one, experiences were variegated. Within the same immigrant groups under study, there was observed segmented (Portes and Zhou 1993) and multiple (Suárez-Orozco 2004) self-identification practices. This way of self-identification significantly differed from traditional linear assimilation theories that proposed a one-directional pattern of self-identification towards identity categories of the host society (Gordon 1971; Gans 1973). The studies also noted the instrumental/situational nature of ethnic identity formation that the study participants mobilised depending on social context (Negel 1994; Gorenburg 1999; Brubaker 2002).

An immigration scholar, Golash-Boza (2006) used survey data to capture the self-identification patterns of immigrants of Latin American origin in the U.S. racial context. He found that the self-identification practices of immigrants of Latin American origin in the U.S. depended largely on the degree of discrimination they encountered in their social interactions with the members of the mainstream white society and their institutions. For example, those Latinos/as whose physical appearance was perceived as indistinguishable from the white majority, experienced no discrimination and hence self-identified themselves as white. Those with darker skin tone and non-white phenotype, however, self-identified in terms of their country of origin, or their parents (for second-generation) and grandparents’ country of origin (for third-generation) or as hyphenated Americans (partially identifying with their country of origin and partially with their country of settlement). Such findings echo Berry’s (1997) suggestion that discrimination compels immigrants to take the separation acculturation route, effectively self-identifying themselves in identities found in their countries of origin. Such findings also challenged straight-line assimilation theories by illustrating that ethnicity does not necessarily fade with each successive generation; instead it remains stronger for non-white immigrants within the U.S. racial system who experience discrimination (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).
Other empirical studies also revealed mixed self-identification practices by study participants, such as a study by Itzigsohn, Giorguli and Vazquez (2006) on Dominican immigrants. The interview results showed that some study participants adopted a ‘Hispanic’ ethno-racial identity, an identity found in the U.S. racial order. Other study participants rejected forms of racial identities encountered in the U.S. and instead strongly self-identified themselves as ‘Indio/a’, a social category peculiar to their country of origin.

In a quantitative study, Benson (2006) explored the racialisation experiences and patterns of U.S.-based racial self-identification for immigrants from Africa and the West Indies using survey data. The findings showed that country of origin, skin colour and duration of stay determine how immigrants respond to their racialisation and their self-identification choices. For example, Puerto Rican immigrants with lighter skin colour distanced themselves from self-identifying as black, while African and West Indian immigrants of varied skin tone, over time, adopted a self-identification as black. Benson’s (2006) argument that immigrants with darker skin colour, over time, self-identified as black echoes classical assimilation theories. However, despite such assertions, I find this position problematic due to the fact that the category ‘African immigrants’ contains a heterogenous group that differ from each other in national-origin, ethnicity, phenotype, skin tone, hair texture, and native social classification systems; hence it appears implausible to speak of ‘African immigrants’ as having similar racialisation experiences as a ‘single’ group.

Another empirical research by Waters (1994) investigated, using in-depth interviews, to what extent second-generation West Indies and Haitian immigrants in New York City responded to imposed racial categories in the U.S. The results indicated that West-Indians and Haitians in America exhibited multiple self-identifications, namely: those who embraced a black American racial identity, those who self-identified in terms of both their national origin and hyphenated ethno-national identities (as West Indian-American and Haitian-American), and those who emphasised their immigrant identity. According to Waters (1994), factors such as the socio-economic position and nativity of the study participants mediated the self-identification choices. Largely, those who lived in black neighbourhoods and in low socio-economic position self-identified as black/African American. This finding reveals how social association and positioning in society shapes and influences one’s sense of self.

The above empirical results suggest that immigrants respond to their imposed racialisation in different ways. Such results contrast with other results such as those by Kusow and Arjouch (2007), Habecker (2012) and Kusow (2006) who described the self-
identification practices of immigrants, originating from the same country of origin, as having a common experience as opposed to varied and segmented.

**Fluid self-identifications**

Other research has shown that immigrant’s self-identification practices tend to be shaped by the different social contexts in which they are located. As Suárez-Orozco (2004) argued, immigrants’ self-identification patterns in their host societies tend to be fluid and situationally-contingent as opposed to consistent across time and space.

For example, a master’s dissertation by Asante (2012) investigated, through focus group interviews, the racialisation experiences and black racial identity development of African immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa (immigrants who originate from a non-racialised social classification system). Asante’s (2012) results showed that, the participants moved between a U.S.-based racial category and a continental ‘African’ identity which they constructed depending on social contexts. The findings further reveal that for such immigrants, there was a constant tension between their newly constructed ‘African’ continental identity that emphasised their non-racialised identity, and a U.S.-based black racial category that marks and positions them at the lowest in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Such findings suggest that the fluid nature of self-identification appears to be informed by context.

The fluid and context-dependent self-identification practices adopted by immigrants are also illustrated in a study by Vasquez (2007). In her Doctoral thesis, Vasquez (2007) investigated the racial self-identification patterns observed within Mexican immigrants’ inter-generational families using interviews. Vasquez results revealed a number of factors that shaped the racial self-identification practices of the participants as ‘Latino’/’Hispanic’. The factors included the influence of a native-born American spouse/partner; personal traits such as phenotype and name; degree of attachment to one’s ethnicity; one’s gender; social position within the U.S. society; social institutions; everyday social context; larger historical context; and one’s immigration status. Vasquez contends that the assimilation patterns of her study participants challenges the linear/straightforward conceptions of assimilation theory. Vasquez (2007) argues that assimilation paths tended to be mediated by diverse factors and contexts and were complex. In other words, in Vasquez’s (2007) finding, the racial self-identification patterns of her participants did not happen in a vacuum but tended to be shaped by a plethora of factors. Such findings support the fluidity of immigrant self-identification patterns.
Similar to the above studies, Awokoya (2012) in her seminal empirical work investigates, through in-depth interviews, the complex and contradictory ways in which 1.5 generation (those who immigrated to the U.S. as children) and second-generation (U.S.-born children of immigrants) Nigerian immigrants in the U.S. shifted their self-identification practices. The participants’ self-identification practices shifted between multiple contexts, namely school, home and peers. Awokoya found that in school contexts, her study participants were perceived as African Americans; however, they asserted their ethnic identities and continental identity as ‘Africans’ in their class room interactions as a devise to distinguish themselves from African-Americans or blacks. At home and in their ethnic enclaves, their ethnic identities were salient. When interacting with African Americans; however, they exhibited self-identification as African-Americans or blacks to avoid being ‘Othered’ by their African-American peers. Such findings attest to the argument that self-identification for immigrants in racialised settlement societies tends to be informed and shaped by the social contexts and situations in which they find themselves (Suárez-Orozco (2004: 177)).

Abdulrahim (2008) interviewed immigrants of Arab countries to investigate how Arab-Americans self-identified themselves in response to racial categories in the United States. He found that those who lived in non-white neighbourhoods distanced themselves from a state-ascribed white racial identity and self-identified as ‘other race’, referring to their ‘Arab’ identity. While those who lived in ‘white’ neighbourhoods adopted a white identity in order to distance themselves from a black racial identity. This study by Abdulrahim (2008) shows the influence of neighbourhood ethnic composition, as was argue by immigration scholars such as Berry (1997: 24) on the self-identification practices of immigrant in host societies.

Assimilating into racialised identities

Some immigrants originating from non-racial societies were observed self-identifying in terms of racial categories found in their settlement societies. Berry (1994) notes that some immigrants tend to follow an assimilation strategy into identity categories of the host society as their preferred adaptation strategy.

A study by immigration scholars Kusow and Arjouch (2007), based on interview data, found that Lebanese immigrants in the U.S. were observed adopting a newly imposed white racial identity. Even if racial categories do not exist in Lebanon, from which the immigrants hailed, such immigrants adopted the white racial identity in order to benefit from white
privilege (Kusow and Arjouch 2007: 90). Such a finding on Lebanese immigrants showed that racial categories are not always resisted or passively embraced; instead, immigrants can also actively adopt them for strategic advantages.

In another study, appropriating a racial category of a host society was also evidenced in the experience of Central American immigrants in the U.S. Yarbrough (2010) studied the racialisation experiences and self-identification practices of Central American immigrants in their daily social interactions with local Americans. He found that their constant racialisation by Americans as ‘Hispanics’ informed their eventual self-identification practises. The participants self-identified as ‘Hispanics’, mirroring their imposed racialisation as ‘Hispanic’ in their everyday life. Such immigrants did not self-identify themselves in racial terms before they immigrated to the U.S., but eventually adopted U.S.-based racial identities as they internalised the ‘Hispanic’ ethno-racial identity in the U.S. Such findings suggest that being externally identified in racial terms influences one’s subsequent self-identificational practices.

Similarly, in one of the early comparative empirical works, Foner (1985) explored through interviews, the racialisation and the resultant race-consciousness of first-generation Jamaican immigrants living in New York and London. Foner (1985) found that, immigrants who originated from a society where they did not self-identify themselves or others as black, confronted racialisation as black and eventually developed consciousness and self-identification as black. What is interesting in Foner’s (1985) findings is that Jamaicans in London who frequently interacted with white British developed a more heightened race-consciousness than those in New York City, who largely lived among their African American peers and hardly interacted with self-segregated white Americans. The findings suggest that one’s racial self-identification choices, in racialised societies, tends to be shaped and influenced by who one frequently interacted with.

In the above studies, the choice by immigrants to self-identify themselves in terms of racial categories found in their settlement societies illustrate that immigrants also actively appropriate racial categories, as part of their sense of self, although they migrated from a society whose social stratification system was different from their countries of settlement.

Despite extensive scholarship on racialisation experiences and racial self-identification patterns of immigrant in the U.S. and other racialised contexts, however, similar research is still in its infancy in the South African racialised landscape. For example, South Africa has seen a dramatic and continued increase in immigrant and refugee communities from diverse national origins, especially from the African continent, but, their encounter with race has
been largely ignored by research. This study addresses this gap by investigating an Eritrean refugee and asylum-seeker community’s encounter with race in post-Apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, in relation to the U.S. racialised context (which is a white majority society), the South African context presents an interesting scenario for theory and research on encounters with race, as it is a black majority society.

The racialisation of Eritrean immigrants in racialised societies

In the past decade or so, much of the preoccupation of the field of Eritrean Diaspora studies has focused largely on, inter alia, their political transnational activities in North American, Europe and South Africa (Hepner 2013), their settlement experiences in the Sudan (Kibreab 2000; Noronha 2004), their adjustment in Italy (Arnone 2008; Abraha 2011; Belloni 2016) in Sudan and Ethiopia (Triebert 2009, 2013; Woldemikael 2013) and their human rights and racism in Israel (Yacobi 2009; (Afeef 2009; Lutterbeck 2009; Paz 2011; Lijnders 2012; Mainwaring 2012; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe, and Campbell 2013; Müller 2016). Still others focused on the detention and deportation experiences of Eritreans in Malta (Lutterbeck 2009; Mainwaring 2012). A few studies moved away from these foci to explore the encounter of Eritreans with experiences of imposed racial classification in their host societies. Two studies that focused on the racialisation experiences of Eritreans and their self-identification practices are notable: Shelly Habecker’s (2012) work on Eritreans in the United States and Arnone’s (2011) study of Eritreans in Italy.

Shelly Habecker (2012) explored how Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants, of Amhara, Tigrayan and Tigrinya ethnic groups, responded to their racialisation in the U.S. racial order as black. She found that Eritreans and Ethiopians strongly resisted their racialisation and instead identified themselves as Habesha, an identity ‘...emphasis[ing] their Semitic origins.…’ (Habecker 2012: 1200). By self-identifying themselves as Habesha, the majority of the study participants resisted being racially perceived as black within the U.S. hierarchical social order.

Surprisingly, however, in another study by Arnone (2011), Eritrean youth in Italy were observed adopting a black identity. Arnone (2011) interviewed second-generation Eritreans in Milan, Italy, to explore their identity and belonging and found that black was a meaningful identity category for the youth. Even though, some of Arnone’s sample self-identified themselves as Habesha, this self-identification was not as dominant as the racialised black identity for the Eritrean youth. Arnone explains this racial self-identification to be the result
of racism and prejudice directed at children of immigrants of African origin and that such an experience could have informed the self-identification of the youth as black.

Empirically, therefore, my study attempts to extend and enrich the few empirical works on Eritrean Diaspora living across various race-conscious national contexts by situating the current study within the ‘race’-conscious South African national context.

**The racialisation of immigrants in the South African context**

The literature on the racialisation of refugees, asylum-seekers and economic migrants in the South African national context is scant. Even though studies have discussed ‘racialisation’ as it relates to immigrants/immigration in South Africa, their use of the term referred to ‘distinguishability as black Africans’ during xenophobic violence and how this racial visibility makes blacks easily identifiable for attacks. For example, researchers such as Handmaker and Parsley (2001), Warner and Finchilescu (2003) Matsinhe (2011) and Adjai and Lazaridis (2013) discuss how black Africans in South Africa are easily identifiable by black South Africans and become victims of xenophobic violence.

However, I do not employ the concept of racialisation in relation to xenophobic violence. I use the concept of racialisation in relation to self-identification practices: how everyday ascriptions of South African racial labels on bureaucratic forms and by ordinary South Africans shape the extent to which refugees and asylum seekers self-identity.

There are, however, a few studies that focused on self-identification practices of immigrants and refugees in South Africa in relation to their embeddedness in a race-conscious South African context: Vandeyar (2011), Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) and Abdi (2015). The work by Vandeyar (2011), titled ‘Immigrant students’ shifting identifications in South African schools’, focused on how children of immigrants of various national origins experienced racialisation and their patterns of self-identification within the school context. Her study was based on a sample comprising children of immigrants of diverse national origins such as Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Congo, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Vandeyar 2011: 4) in Gauteng schools. She employed semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes to capture their experiences. First, she found that youth with African phenotypic features were assumed to be black by South Africans due to their phenotypic similarity to black South Africans. Those with indian features were perceived to be indian South Africans by their school peers. Some of the participants self-identified strategically in terms of a racial category found in South Africa as black in order to
benefit from opportunities accorded to black South Africans and not because they genuinely meant to self-identify as such.

Vandeyar (2011) observed that the majority of those racialised as black expressed strong identification with their ethnicity-based, non-racial identities, which they brought from their countries of origin, and in terms of a global pan-ethnic identity as ‘African’. Vandeyar (2001: 7) also noted that, despite some of her participants’ attempts to pass as black South Africans, in order to evade being perceived as non-South African and labelled makwerekwere⁹, their accents and inability to be speak fluent South African indigenous languages exposed them to be seen as non-South Africans. Some of those racialised as Indian also had difficulty passing as Indian South Africans due to their accents.

In a similar study, Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) titled: ‘Re-negotiating Identities and Reconciling Cultural Ambiguities: Socio-cultural Experiences of Indian Immigrant Students in South African Schools’, explored the experiences of children of immigrant youth originating from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in three secondary schools located in the Gauteng province. Their results revealed that, instead of a phenotype-based racial self-identification, the students predominantly self-identified themselves according to their ethnicity in terms of ‘ancestral,’ ‘geographic,’ and ‘home-country’ (Vandeyar and Vandeyar 2012: 159).

Another ethnographic study by Abdi (2015) looked at how Somalis ‘…position themselves within a [South African] society polarized and segregated on ethnic and racial bases’ (Abdi 2015: 112). Therefore, regarding the self-identification choices of Somali refugees in South Africa, Abdi (2015) found that the self-identification practices of Somalis in South Africa, who originated from a clan-based social classification system, attested to the ‘…the situational nature of [their] identity’ (Abdi 2015: 112) and was mediated by contextual factors. For example, for Somalis, ‘African identity is brought to the fore only in times of crisis and violence against them in the hands of some black South Africans’ (Abdi 2015: 112). During xenophobic attacks, therefore, Somalis in South Africa construct a black/African identity to emphasise their commonality with black South Africans hence invoking the discourse of ‘black on black’ violence. However, in normal day-to-day life ‘they rarely identify with the Bantu peoples who make up the country’s majority black population’ (Abdi 2015: 112); instead, they emphasise their Muslim religious identity ‘to build alliances with … [South African] Indian Muslims’ (Abdi 2015: 112) in order to benefit economically.

⁹ Makwerekwere is a derogatory term or epithet targeted at African foreigners living in South Africa loosely interpreted as: ‘an unwanted non-South African outsider’.
The findings of Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) demonstrate that the majority of their participants challenged and de-familiarised the South African racial categories and self-identification practices in terms of such categories by emphasising self-identification choices that moved beyond physical appearance. Abdi’s (2015) findings point to the strategic nature and situationality of immigrant self-identity in the post-Apartheid South African context.

The empirical studies by Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) are an important contribution to the field of race, ethnicity and immigration in South Africa. However, their studies are contextually bound within the school context. My study, however, focuses on the everyday racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in multiple social contexts and urban settings and moves beyond Gauteng province to include Cape Town and Durban. Furthermore, the racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers (as a distinct national origin group) in South Africa have not been explored by their studies. My study empirically fills this silence by exploring the everyday lived racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers as a distinct national-origin group. Abdi’s (2015) finding also contributes to scholarly understanding of how Somali refugees in post-Apartheid South Africa racially position themselves malleably in response to circumstances. My study extends Abdi’s work in focusing on Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers as another migrant community who originated from non-racialised ethnicity and socio-cultural based self-identification practices.

In summary, in this chapter, I have provided context for the reader to understand social classification systems in Eritrea and South Africa and a literature review on racialisation of immigrants within which this study is empirically located. Next I discuss the study’s methodology.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this methodology chapter is to discuss and justify the research strategy followed to answer the research questions posed for the study. Research regarding how refugees and asylum-seekers encounter racial categories in their societies of settlement is limited within the South African context. Most of the studies that have focused on how immigrants encountered racial categories in their racially organised host societies were concentrated in the U.S. context. As little is known about the everyday racialisation experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers in the South African socio-cultural context, this study employed a qualitative methodology to explore this phenomenon.

The aim of this study was to explore how first-generation adult Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers experienced racialisation, give meaning to their racialisation and how their racialisation experiences shaped their self-identification practices in their everyday lives in the South African context. An interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach was selected to investigate the subjective experiences of the study participants. Data analysis also followed IPA’s protocol that focused on everyday lived subjective experiences of racialisation and self-identification.

Qualitative Methodology

In line with my social constructionist paradigm, I employed a qualitative methodological approach to produce qualitative data which is a product of a co-construction between me as a researcher and the study participants from whom experiential data was elicited. Employing a qualitative approach, therefore, helped me explore the study participants’ subjective lived world (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 2; Ryan-Nicholls and Will 2009: 76).

The subjective world of my study participants that this study sets out to explore, entailed understanding how Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers recounted their subjective, everyday racialisation experiences, what race and the practice of being racially classified meant to them, and how they preferred to self-identify in response to their imposed racialisation experiences. The nature of such research questions demanded a qualitative lens as there is a paucity of research investigating such questions in the South African context. Employing a qualitative methodological lens enabled me, therefore, to gather information
that delved deeper into the participants’ everyday inner world. My purpose was not to establish how one isolated variable was related to another variable but to understand the lived world of my research participants in its totality as a holistic phenomenon. Furthermore, I am aware that as a lived phenomenon, racial self-identification practice is a complex aspect of everyday world hence I adopted a qualitative methodological perspective that allowed me to navigate such a complex everyday world. For that reason, I decided not to employ a positivist-oriented quantitative lens to explore the phenomenon of interest.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 2) noted that qualitative methodology is ‘a field of enquiry in its own right’ rather than an accessory to quantitative approaches. They define qualitative methodology as:

[A] situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 3)

The above quote by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) appropriately reflects the purpose and focus of this thesis, which was to represent the subjective lived world of the research participants through my personal engagement with them both as an academic researcher and as an insider. I have attempted to bring to light my participants’ subjective voices by allowing them to recount their experiences through in-depth individual interviews and by presenting their voices as quotations in the results section.

Smith (2004: 53) noted that a qualitative approaches assist researchers to explore and make sense of study participants’ everyday experiences; however, as Ryan-Nicholls and Will (2009: 74-75) noted, researchers that employ qualitative approaches are criticised for their lack of methodological rigor. Ryan-Nicholls and Will (2009: 75) also argued that such criticism is based on poor understanding of the nature of qualitative approach. Supporting the strength of qualitative approaches, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009: 45-48) argued that
qualitative approaches should not be judged based on the standards of quantitative methodologies as the two approaches have their own individual strengths. Ryan-Nicholls and Will (2009: 72) further suggested that one of the strengths of a qualitative approach is its ability to capture complex, everyday, subjective perspectives and experiences of individuals through close researcher engagement with research participants.

In a qualitative study, the notion of ‘detachment’ of the researcher from study subjects/respondents, which is valued in quantitative methodology, is replaced with notions of ‘co-construction’ of meaning by the researcher and research participants (Ryan-Nicholls and Will 2009: 76). In qualitative research, close interaction of the researcher with the study participants is valued. Furthermore, the idea of ‘context’ is an important aspect of qualitative approach as the focus is not on the generalisability of findings but on insight and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon under study (Smith et al. 2009: 55). Phenomenology and more specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is one of the qualitative methodology approaches that focuses on the lived subjective experiences of individuals (Smith et al. 2009) that this research project utilised to answer the research questions of the study. Below I justify and discuss the IPA approach.

Justification for choosing IPA for this research

The objective of this research was to explore how, in their everyday life, the study participants experienced imposed racial classification by both local South Africans and on various South African administrative and bureaucratic forms; what it means to be racially categorised; and the extent to which such externally imposed racialisation shaped their racial self-identifications. The intention was to understand this phenomenon in a way that would allow study participants to share their subjective, everyday experiences that may not be captured by traditional quantitative methodologies. Furthermore, the exclusive focus of IPA on subjective perspectives and meanings individuals give to their daily experience of a phenomenon prompted me to select the approach for the study to the exclusion of other qualitative approaches. A narrative approach was ruled out because the focus of my study is not on narrating experiences in chronological order. Denzin (1989), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Elliot (2005), Czarniawska (2004) noted that the chronology of narrative research, with an emphasis on sequence, sets narrative approach apart from other genres of research. As the aim of this research is not to construct a specific theory from data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998), Grounded Theory was not selected as an appropriate
qualitative research approach. Ethnography as a qualitative design was not employed for the study because the aim of this study is not to investigate how a culture works or to ‘describe and interpret the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group’ (Harris 1968). Case study (Yin 2003) was considered and eventually set aside because the focus of my study was not on understanding experiences in a specific institutional setting or a ‘bounded system’ (Creswell 2007:73).

In order to explore the subjective experiences of the participants in their contextually-framed everyday ‘life worlds’, a qualitative methodology was employed as an appropriate methodology (Smith et al. 2009). More specifically, IPA as an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted as the most relevant research approach because it allowed for a framework that enabled me to make sense of the subjective experiences of the participants in light of contextual factors. Such contextual factors include: broader cultural, social, and historical factors that shaped and informed their experiences and responses. Smith et al. (2009: 163-172), moreover, recommend that IPA is an appropriate approach to explore identity formation of persons such as immigrants and refugees transitioning from one society to another, which this study is focused on.

An interpretative phenomenological research approach

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a recent approach to qualitative methodology. The research strategy first gained popularity in psychology and has in recent times been widely used by other disciplines such as the humanities, health and social science fields (Smith et al. 2009). One of the recent uses of the approach has been in research on identity formation of persons such as immigrants and refugees transitioning from one society to another (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009: 163-172).

A notable example of such research was a study by Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000), who explored how immigrants from the former Yugoslavia construct UK-based new identities, the negotiation of their former self-identification systems, and the meanings they gave to their identity formations in their new society of settlement. Smith and Osborne (2004) noted that IPA is a suitable approach when exploring how individuals experience and make sense of a particular phenomenon as well as when exploring issues of self-identifications among transitioning groups such as immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Smith and Osborne (2004: 68) also recommend that when the interest of the qualitative research project is in complex, unexplored phenomenon and seeking subjective human perspectives, IPA is an
appropriate research approach. Smith and Osborn (2004: 70) advised that employing IPA allows researchers to be open and flexible when exploring how research participants construct their lived experiences during interview encounters.

According to Smith et al. (2009), three theoretical dimensions, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography inform the IPA approach. Below, I will briefly discuss the three theoretical dimensions to IPA.

**Phenomenology**
The theoretical perspective of phenomenology is at the centre of an IPA approach and is described by Smith et al. (2009: 11) as ‘a philosophical approach to the study of [human] experience’. Smith et al. (2009: 13-18) argued that, among others, the notable philosophers to the approach of phenomenology were Husserl (1970) and Heidegger (1962/1927). For Husserl (1970: 3), experience was a de-contextualised universal phenomenon and he argued that there is a universal essence to any human experience. As a result, Husserl’s (1970: 8) phenomenological focus was on description rather than interpretation of the phenomenon under study. He advocated the concept of ‘bracketing’, in which the researcher detaches their experiences and pre-conceptions from the phenomenon under study (Smith et al. 2009: 20-21).

Also known as ‘transcendental phenomenology’, Husserl (1970: 4-6) advocated for objectively locating experience detached from subjective meanings given to the experience under investigation, both by the experiencing subject and the researcher/s (Smith et al. 2009: 20-22). Methodologically, therefore, seen through the lens of Husserl’s phenomenology, research questions are focused on understanding the nature or ‘essence’ of a particular experience, dissociated from subjective meanings given to the phenomenon under study (Smith et al. 2009: 22).

According to Smith et al. (2009: 21), Heidegger refined Husserl’s phenomenological theory by postulating that an experiencing individual cannot be detached from their personal, cultural, social, political and historical contexts hence their experiences are ‘…embedded and immersed in a world of objects, relationships and culture….’ (Heidegger 1962/1927: 5), therefore, developed a notion of subjectivity in which the subject, who experiences a phenomenon, is internally incoherent and changes overtime as their experiences are embedded in ever-changing personal and broader circumstantial contexts.

Furthermore, Heidegger (1962/1927: 23) emphasised that the experiencing subject tends to be influenced by inter-subjective interactions with other individuals in a social
context as every form of experience is governed by embodiment. The experiencing subject is located as an embodied individual, co-existing with other embodied individuals, and embedded within ever-changing contexts. Heidegger described this embeddedness within other individuals and broader social, historical, cultural and political contexts ‘the life world’ (Heidegger 1962/1927: 27). According to this perspective, therefore, researchers employing an IPA approach, interpret the experiences of their study participants as subjects embedded and influenced by both their inter-subjective interactions with other individuals, and broader contexts shaping and framing their experiences.

Hermeneutics
Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is the other theoretical foundation of IPA. Heidegger and Gadamer are influential figures in IPA’s hermeneutic dimension (Smith et al. 2009: 25-27). According to the hermeneutic perspective, the researcher/investigator of a phenomenon under study is positioned as an important party in understanding the phenomenon in question. As opposed to Husserlian perspective on doing phenomenological research, the interpretive phenomenological or hermeneutic perspective values the researcher’s interpretations and subjectivity as integral to her/his ability to make sense of the study participants’ lived world (Smith et al. 2009: 53).

In other words, as noted by Smith et al. (2009: 24-25), the Husserlian perspective focuses on describing and capturing the phenomenon of interest and advocates for the detachment of the researcher. However, according to Smith et al. (2009: 25), this tends to be a difficult undertaking, as the researcher, as an instrument of data collection, analysis and interpretation, could not completely detach themselves from the world of the participants; instead, they are inextricably immersed in its interpretations.

Smith and Osborn (2008: 53) noted that in a two-stage interpretation of the phenomenon, participants, followed by the researcher, engage in a ‘double hermeneutic’ process, whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their experiences. This two-stage process, according to Smith and Osborn (2008: 53) and Larkin, Watta and Clifton (2006: 115) suggested that the outcome of an interpretative account is mediated by the inter-subjective relationship between the researcher and the research participants, produced and shaped by their social encounter during interviews.

Furthermore, according to this view, as an interpretative approach, hermeneutics provides both the qualitative researcher and the study participants with an opportunity to play their role in understanding the phenomenon under study. A hermeneutic perspective suggests
that, access to another individual’s experience is mediated by and is complicated by the researcher’s subjective pre-conceptions and beliefs about the phenomenon under study; hence they recommend the importance of being aware of one’s own inevitable bias and preconceptions (Smith et al. 2009: 33).

The lens of hermeneutics is important for my study because, as an Eritrean refugee from a Tigrinya ethnic group (speaking the same language as my participants), who share the racialisation experiences of my study participants, I would argue that my insider positionality positions me to interpret the complex and nuanced everyday racialisation experiences and the meanings my participants give to their imposed racialisation experiences and their self-identification practices and strategies.

**Ideography**

In addition to Heidegger’s phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is also informed by the concept of ‘ideography’ (Smith et al. 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009: 26-27), ideography is focused on particular (individual) experiences rather than nomothetic experiences which is concerned with making universal claims about larger populations as emphasised by quantitative approaches. Smith et al. (2009: 27) and Reid, Flowers & Larkin (2005: 21) noted that IPA views individual study participants as knowledgeable experts on their own everyday experiences that are capable of informing and enlightening researchers about the phenomenon of interest, which they themselves experience in their lived lives.

Smith et al. (2009: 27) asserted that the ideographic commitment of IPA focuses on the detail of experiences of particular cases as well as depth of analysis linked to particular contexts, shaping and framing the phenomenon under study. They further argue that the focus on individual persons experiencing a phenomenon allows differences in the experienced phenomenon to emerge, and at the same time similarities of the experience to be compared and discussed under common themes.

The ideographic focus allows differences and similarities of individual experiences to be accounted for during the analysis and discussion phases of the research (Smith et al. 2009: 29). But, the ideographic focus of analysis does not preclude the researcher from making conservative general claims reflective of, for example, the commonalities of experiences recounted. The emphasis on individual case analysis is an attempt to commitment to detail and depth of analysis of individual accounts of their experiences and the context in which the phenomenon under study was experienced and recounted (Smith et al. 2009: 30-32).
The ideographic focus of IPA is relevant to the intention of my research which was to investigate how each study participant recounted and made sense of their experiences of racialisation and how they self-identified. The attempt was to explore both the uniqueness and commonalities of their experiences and make cautious general statements about the workings of race and racialisation in everyday life in South Africa. In the findings chapters, I have analysed each case as an ideographic unit trying to make sense of how the phenomenon under study was experienced by each individual and the context within which the phenomenon was experienced. In the results section, I aggregate the isolated individual experiences into meaningful explanations by way of theories and related empirical studies.

There are some criticisms of IPA. Willig (2009: 66-68) for example, charges that IPA tends to be ‘elitist’ as it only enables the subjective experiences of those who can articulate their lived experiences to be heard while it excludes the subjective lived experiences of the speech-impaired and inarticulate who do not possess appropriate language skills. Second, scholars critique IPA for its limitations in generalisability of recounted experiences of participants to a wider population due to the ideographic focus of IPA. Despite such limitations, however, IPA was suitable for this study for the following reasons: (1) the focus of the study is on the subjective perspective of participants’ everyday lived experiences of racialisation; (2) IPA allows the mundane experiences of Eritreans as part of other marginalised refugees and asylum-seeker communities to be heard. (3) IPA’s principle of double-hermeneutics allowed me as an insider to make sense of and interpret the nuances of experiences of the participants; (4) IPA is compatible with my overarching theoretical/philosophical perspective of social constructionism. Crotty (1998: 12) noted that ‘constructionism and phenomenology are intertwined’.

Research Design

The research sites

Research participants from three cities in South Africa, namely Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg were selected to explore their everyday racialisation experiences in those urban spaces. For the purpose of this study, I provide the population demographics of the three cities in which the study participants are located and where the experiences of racialisation took place.

The table below presents percentage proportion of the four South African population groups in Cate Town, Durban and Johannesburg (Source: Statistics South Africa 2012).
Table 4.1 Racial group composition in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>black</th>
<th>white</th>
<th>coloured</th>
<th>asian/indian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durban</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>76.4%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Statistics South Africa (2012), the coloured population is highest in Cape Town relative to other racial groups followed by blacks; the asian/indian population is lowest in the city. In Durban, even though the population of blacks is highest, the indian population is highest when compared to indian communities in other parts of South Africa. In Johannesburg, the black population is the majority followed by the white population.

**Participant recruitment and sampling strategy**

I am familiar with the urban settings of Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. I have had female and male Eritrean contacts (both friends and acquaintances) in those cities. In the three cities, both convenience and snow-ball sampling techniques were employed to recruit potential study participants. Both men and women were recruited from each study site. Given my familiarity with the Eritrean community in the three cities, there are not many women, and the profile of Eritrean immigrants in the cities is male-dominated. For that reason, I recruited 31 men and 15 women in total. I conducted 15 interviews in Johannesburg (five women and ten men), 16 in Cape Town (four women and 12 men), and 15 in Durban (six women and nine men). I suspect given the disproportionate although not inappropriately high number of men compared to women for this study, the results of the study might be biased towards and reflect the lived experiences of men.

The breakdown of the profile of the study participants in the three cities is depicted in the table below:
Table 4.2

Participants in Durban

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in South Africa</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Immigration status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selam</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Asylum-seeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merhawit</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Government department employee</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girma</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Government department employee</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liya</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saron</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haimanot</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathreth</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Asylum-seeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alamin</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temesgen</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tedros</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habtay</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinfe</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants in Cape Town

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<tr>
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<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in South Africa</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Immigration status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
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<td>Lemlem</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belay</td>
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<td>Trader</td>
<td>Refugee</td>
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<td>Trader</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</table>
Participants in Johannesburg

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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Government department employee</td>
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<td>Refugee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the study participants were known to me while I recruited others through the help of those known to me. I employed a convenience sampling strategy to locate and recruit study participants that were known to me.

In employing convenience sampling, I first approached my acquaintances and friends located in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg in person and contacted them by telephone. I asked them if they could participate in the study as interviewees. I explained to them the aim and motivation of the study. I revealed to them that I was conducting the interviews for
my doctoral degree and the aim of the study was to understand how Eritreans living in South Africa experienced racialisation by ordinary South Africans and on official forms, and whether such experience shaped their patterns of racial self-identification. Most of those contacted were supportive of my research undertaking and expressed their willingness to be interviewed.

The possible effect of using convenience sampling is that due to the manner of selection and because there is no random selection from a known research population, findings cannot be generalised to the research population.

Once I had secured their agreement to be interviewed, I asked them if they could help me locate other Eritreans they knew to participate in the study. They agreed. Therefore, through a snow-ball sampling strategy, I was able to locate Eritreans unknown to me in the three urban areas and after explaining the purpose of my research project and the voluntary aspect of their participation I explained to them that they could withdraw from the study at any stage of their participation.

They agreed to participate. Initially over sixty potential study participants were located. However, only forty-six were able to actually participate. The same method of recruiting men was applied to women. The primary motivation for recruiting women in this study was in order to give them visibility, inclusion and representation in research. Eritrean women’s voice, in the reviewed literature, is overshadowed by gender-neutral references, hence their voices are excluded.

**Data collection method**

I conducted all the interviews and no field worker was utilized in any of the interviews. I conducted 11 interviews in Durban from 20 March to 06 April, 2015. The remaining 4 interviews were conducted from 06 May to 13 May, 2015. In Cape Town, interviews were conducted from 01 June to 15 June and in Johannesburg from 1 August to 30 August, 2015.

The place and timing of interview was determined by the choice of the research participants. I did not dictate as to where and when to conduct the interview sessions. Instead, in the three sites, the majority of the interviews took place in the homes of the study participants as they chose to be interviewed at their places of residence and work places. Others preferred to be interviewed at Eritrean and Ethiopian restaurants. There were no interruptions during the interview sessions, and all the interviews went ahead without any incidents. On average, interviews lasted between one hour and one and a half hours.
All individual in-depth interviews were conducted in Tigrinya and recorded using a digital recorder. I also noted down my observations during the interview sessions in a journal (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009: 63-64).

Before I developed the interview questions, I first conducted a pilot study by talking to the potential study participants about the type of questions that were relevant to their experiences. Many of my research participants were helpful in helping me construct the kinds of appropriate interview questions for the study. The resultant interview questions were, therefore, the result of inputs provided by some of the study participants. The interview questions were compatible with the primary research questions that framed the research process.

Smith et al. (2009: 57) described qualitative interviews as ‘a conversation with a purpose’. Furthermore, Smith and Osborne (2004: 57) noted that the in-depth, semi-structured interview method is an ideal data gathering technique for interpretative phenomenological analysis. According to them, the qualitative interview method enables flexibility and allows the interviewer to explore complex and emerging issues, which produce rich qualitative data.

Furthermore, Smith and Osborne (2004: 57-58) noted that in doing an IPA study, the in-depth interview method allows study participants to control and guide the direction of the interview as they are deemed experts in the telling of their experiences and stories. According to Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005: 22), in-depth individual interviews allow interviewer and participants to ‘work in flexible collaboration, to identify and interpret the relevant meanings that are used to make sense of the topic’ (Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005: 22). Smith et al. (2009: 57) noted that in conducting interpretative phenomenological analytic research, the subjective experiences and meanings of participants are best explored through individual in-depth interview data gathering techniques.

In capturing the diverse and complex racialisation experiences of the study participants, I asked questions touching upon the racialisation experiences of the study participants in their encounters with local South Africans and bureaucratic forms that ask for their race; the meanings they attached to their racialisation experiences; their racial self-identification practices; and the status of their ethnic self-identification practices which they brought from home. The interview questions were also focused on asking about how often the participants encountered racialisation and by whom, and explored the different social contexts of racialisation experiences. In addition to such broad questions, detailed follow up questions
were also posed. (Please see Appendix II for the detailed interview questions of both the English and Tigrinya versions).

**Data analysis**

After transcribing the tape-recorded interviews conducted in Tigrinya, data analysis was done while the transcribed material was in its original Tigrinya version. After the identification of themes, representative quotations under each theme were translated into English for the purposes of writing up the results and discussion chapters.

After fully transcribing the material, the transcript was read several times to have a full grasp of the content of the transcribed material (Smith *et al.* 2009: 65). Analysis of the transcript was focused on racialisation experiences, meanings of the experiences, and patterns of self-identification practices (Smith *et al.* 2009: 66). Smith noted that the identification of experience, meaning and identity is of paramount importance in IPA and that the interest should be in trying ‘…to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency.’ (Smith *et al.* 2009: 66). Furthermore, a two-level interpretation process of the subjective experiences of study participants is proposed, according to Smith *et al.* (2009: 67).

According to the recommendations by Smith *et al.* (2009: 68), first, the researcher identifies themes that relate to the experiences, and how participants make sense of their experiences. Second, the researcher makes sense of the experiences of the participants by linking their experiences to broader political, cultural, social and historical contexts that shape and frame their experiences and sense-making processes. Smith *et al.* (2009: 69) described this process of understanding the transcribed data as a ‘double-hermeneutic’ strategy in which the researcher attempts to make sense of what study participants say about their lived experiences. Following this advice, I have attempted to make sense of the racialisation experiences, participants’ own sense making and the self-identification practices of the participants by linking their narratives to broader political, cultural, social and historical contexts that shape and frame their experiences, sense-making processes and self-identification patterns. Smith *et al.* (2009: 70-73) also advised that in conducting an IPA study, the analysis, in identifying themes, should focus on diversity of experiences and sense-making practices rather than on homogenous experiences only. I have captured such diversity of experiences of the study participants by focusing on multiple and complex experiences, sense-making, and self-identification patterns in the transcribed data.
After coding the transcribed data to locate main patterns in the data, the identification of main themes (super-ordinate themes) and sub-themes (Smith et al: 2009: 53) progressively continued until clear patterns emerged.

**Credibility and reliability of the findings**

The aspect of credibility in qualitative research is concerned with capturing the lived experiences, perceptions and meanings participants give to their world as close as possible (Shenton 2004: 64-66). Shenton recommended that in order to be able to understand the lived world of study participants and their accounts, researchers use an appropriate method to capture the experiences, be familiar with their world, and develop rapport with study participants in order to allow them to describe their experiences honestly. A focus on ‘thick description’ of the phenomenon is emphasised. Furthermore, and after collecting and analysing data, researchers need to check with the study participants to confirm whether the analysed data captured their accounts rather than an imposed interpretation from the researcher (Shenton 2004: 73). Following Shenton’s advice, I have used interpretative phenomenological analysis as a methodological framework in order to capture the subjective perspectives and meanings participants have about their racialisation experiences and identity formation patterns. I am familiar with the culture, language and lived world of the study participants, as I also experience similar racialisation. Moreover, my insider view possibly allowed me to get close to the subjective world of the research participants. At the same time, my insider positionality could have biased the study. For example due to my shared cultural worldview and experiences of racialisation with the participants, my subjectivity could have impacted and shaped how I understood and interpreted the experiences of the participants.

**Transferability**

The aim of this research was to explore the complex and multiple subjective racialisation experiences, the participants’ sense making of their racialisation experiences and their self-identification patterns in Durban, Cape Town and South Africa. The concept of transferability relates to the application and relevance of research findings of a study to other populations and contexts, a requirement and criterion more relevant to quantitative studies (Malterud 2001; Shenton 2004: 71-73). However, the focus of this study was on context-bound findings rather than on producing generalisable results. Malterud (2001: 486) and Shenton (2004: 71-73) argued that the results of qualitative data are mostly applicable to a specific setting and
population rather than generalisable to other settings and the population at large. The intention of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the participants and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in relation to particular contexts. Therefore, the results of this study are not intended to be generalisable to other populations and settings. However, the findings of this study could stimulate further research and eventually quantitative approaches on the phenomenon of racialisation to determine relationships between variables qualitatively explored in this study.

**Dependability**

As noted by Shenton (2004: 71), the reliability of qualitative research tends to be difficult to establish due to the changing nature of the social world and the contextual factors surrounding a phenomenon under study. However, he recommends aiming for an in-depth methodological description of the study in order to allow the study to be repeated by future researchers. Heeding this advice and recommendation, I have attempted to provide a detailed description of the study participants’ profile, the urban settings I selected them from, and the techniques of sampling and selection I employed. Furthermore, I have mapped out, in detail, the process of data analysis. However, even if such detailed description is provided, an exact replication of the study could prove difficult due to possible inaccessibility of the same participants employed for the study and other unforeseen contextual changes in future (Shenton 2004: 71).

**Confirmability**

In order to establish quality assurance, Shenton (2004: 72) advised that qualitative researchers be aware of their idiosyncratic and subjective biases in the research process, and the admission of the researcher’s assumptions and beliefs and other shortcomings. This reflexive practice by the qualitative researcher, Shenton (2004) noted, is essential. I have disclosed my macro-theoretical philosophical lens (which is social constructionism) at the beginning of the second chapter, and this perspective could possibly shape how I view the participants’ lived world. I have also disclosed that I share similar experiences of racialisation by both ordinary South Africans and different institutions, through their forms, and that this subjective experiences could have influenced how I conceptualised and approached the study and my making sense of the study participant’s accounts. Moreover, since I share subjective
Positionality

While doing the study, I was aware of my positionality. In interviewing participants, I positioned myself in a dual role: both as an outsider (an academic researcher) and as an insider (as a Tigrinya speaking Eritrean refugee). Zinn (1979: 211-212) and Ganga and Scott (2006: 15) noted that in conducting research involving a researcher and research participants sharing some characteristics, the dimensions of insider vs. outsider status of the researcher should be balanced. I have adhered to Ganga and Scott (2006:15) and Zinn’s (1979: 212) advice in being aware of my positionality. I was aware that my position as an academic researcher could create a power relation imbalance when dealing with some of the participants, and that such a status could have positioned me to be seen as an outsider (Zinn 1979: 213). My role as a Tigrinya speaking Eritrean refugee, also experiencing racialisation in my everyday life, positioned me to be viewed as an insider to my research participants. From my interactions and observations, my insider status had outweighed my outsider status; and this advantage had helped me in building rapport and the subsequent smooth interview sessions with the participants (Ganga and Scott 2006: 14). However, being a member of the social group I was researching, this insider positionality could have shaped and influenced how I viewed and understood the whole research process. Common assumptions I share about race and ethnicity with my fellow Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers could have influenced how I framed and interpreted the work. I have attempted to exercise continuous reflexivity throughout the research process in order to minimize bias that comes with researching one’s own community.

Reflexivity: my role in the research process

The concept of reflexivity is related to the disclosure of the researcher’s subjectivity and is important to include when utilising a qualitative methodology where the researcher and study participants co-construct and co-produce data (Zinn 1979; Ahern 1999; Ganga and Scott 2006: 16). The purpose of disclosing my subjectivity is not to ‘bracket’ or put aside my previous experiences and pre-suppositions — as is the case when doing a descriptive phenomenological study. The intention was to disclose my experiences and beliefs so that the
reader could see how my subjectivity influenced how I interpreted the experiences of the study participants as is required in interpretive phenomenology (Smith et al. 2009: 53).

When I first came to South Africa as an asylum-seeker a few years ago, I noticed that people gave names and meanings to individuals of particular physical appearance. I learned that people in South African have racial names: white, black, Indian and coloured. Soon after my arrival in South Africa, I started to be conscious of the colour of my skin, the texture of my hair and other bodily physical attributes after encounters with experiences of racialisation. In Pretoria, people would mistake me for a coloured or Indian. On several occasions, South Africans would speak to me in Afrikaans thinking that I was coloured. At other times, South Africans would ask me, ‘Are you Indian or coloured?’

Ever since my arrival up until now, I have always been categorised as either Indian or coloured by ordinary South Africans in my everyday interactions. I think I have become more race-conscious now than when I was back in Eritrea or my early days in South Africa. I have learned to internalize race-consciousness and my racial place in South Africa, even if it tends to be more fluid. I have not stopped from struggling to find out my singular racial identity here in South Africa. I am different at different times. At times I assert a coloured identity thinking that I appear more coloured than Indian or black depending on who I am interacting with and the nature of the conversation.

At other times, I adopt a black racial identity, depending on a particular context I am in. I live in a racial landscape navigating different identities and adopting more than one racial category in my everyday life. But, I was less conscious of my racial identity back in Eritrea where people talk less about race and more about one’s geographic origin or ethno-linguistic identities (Woldemikael 1993: 18; Bereketeab 2000: 257; Kibreab 2000: 255; Naty 2001: 578; Bereketeab 2002: 139; Dirar 2007: 257). Back in Eritrea, people normally ask others: ‘Abey gezawitika?’ (‘Which neighbourhood are you from?’) Or ‘Abey adika?’ (Loosely translated in English as ‘where is your village of origin?’). In Eritrea, people are not used to questions like, ‘what is your race?’ I am a member of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group and I grew up in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, predominantly inhabited by the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group. Asmara is a city where people with a diversity of physical appearances live: a wide range of hair textures, facial features and skin tones. Yet, Eritreans never referred to each other in racial terms. I never thought about my racial identity back in Asmara, Eritrea.

Therefore, given my racialisation experiences and my struggles with racial self-identification in my everyday life in South Africa, my background could have influenced how
I made sense of the experiences and self-identification patterns of the study participants (Ahern 1999: 408). I believe, however, given the interpretive nature of the study, my background and shared racialisation experiences with the participants was advantageous as, I would argue, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding and insights into the nuanced racialisation and self-identification experiences of the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009: 53).

**Ethical considerations**

Doing research involving human participants particularly refugees and asylum-seekers requires, as vulnerable groups, considerations of protecting research participants’ privacy and avoiding situations that cause harm to them (Haggerty 2004: 43). I was aware of ethical considerations that all researchers dealing with human subjects, should adhere to.

I have adhered to the University of Pretoria’s basic principles of ethics governing researchers and their human participants: risk/benefit analysis, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality. Considering the risk/benefit aspect, the nature and themes of the interviews did not expose my participants to either psychological or physical harm; hence there was no risk involved while engaging with the research participants; all interviews were completed without any complaint or incident.

All the study participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the study so that they voluntarily participate in the study having a clear idea of the nature of the study (Haggerty 2004: 44). I informed all the participants that the purpose of the study was to explore Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers’ lived racialisation experiences, the meanings they give to their racialisation, and their self-identification patterns in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg. I also explained to them that the research project had the potential to give voice to the under-researched Eritrean community in South Africa.

Furthermore, I explained to the study participants that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they were free to drop out of interview proceedings if they wished to do so at any stage (Haggerty 2004: 43; Maree 2007: 146). After this, I asked the participants to complete consent forms voluntarily. I explained to them that the purpose of the consent forms was to obtain a formal consent from them that they were willing to participate in the research project. However, I also explained to the participants that their consent did not, in any way, bind them to honour their agreement that they had the choice to withdraw from participating in the study even after they had signed the consent forms.
I have also adhered to the principle of privacy and confidentiality principles when involving humans in research. I had assured them that their real names would be replaced with fictitious pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy. I have replaced the real names of the study participants with pseudonyms (Haggerty 2004: 43; Maree 2007: 146). I have also assured the participants that private information that they deemed confidential would not be shared with any other party.

Jacobsen, K. and Landau, B. (2003: 187) advised that care must be taken in researching refugees as a vulnerable population. One of the risks they cited is if the research touches on how refugees ‘... might be engaged in illegal or semi-legal activities, [this] raises many ethical problems.’ If refugees’ illegal activities are revealed in the research and published, ‘the political and legal marginality of refugees...means that they have few rights and are vulnerable to arbitrary action on the part of state authorities.’ I am aware of this risk and have avoided interview questions that relate to possible illegal activities which my participants engaged. The topic of the study and the research questions were only interested in participants’ experiences of their everyday racialisation and patterns of their self-identification and questions relating to legality or illegality of activities were not part of the research aim.

This chapter outlined the justification of this study for employing a qualitative methodology and more specifically an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The following findings chapter discusses the everyday racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers on bureaucratic forms.
CHAPTER FIVE
EXPERIENCING RACIAL CATEGORISATION ON
BUREAUCRATIC FORMS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the little known everyday racialisation experiences of first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers on bureaucratic and administrative forms in the post-Apartheid South African context.

Most of the studies on how immigrants/refugees/asylum-seekers react to the experiences of racialisation on bureaucratic forms are located in the U.S. For example, Vargas-Ramos’ (2014) study on Puerto Rican immigrants and Rodríguez’ (2000) investigation on immigrants of Latin America focused on their racialisation on census forms in the U.S. racial system. Little is known about how the phenomenon of bureaucratic racialisation is experienced by refugees and asylum-seekers in the South African racial context. Much of the literature on bureaucratic racialisation in post-Apartheid South Africa focuses on the historical formation and reproduction of the white, black, indian, and coloured racial categories on institutional forms and their effect on South African citizens. Mostly, arguments and discourses around bureaucratic racialisation have been concentrated on issues of race-based redress in post-Apartheid South Africa as they relate to South African citizens.

For example, Posel (2001a: 109-110) noted the reproduction and embeddedness of Apartheid-constructed racial categories in post-Apartheid South Africa on institutional forms for purposes of redress. Alexander (2005: 3-6) argued against the use of bureaucratic racial categories for post-Apartheid South Africa, citing that such practice potentially essentialises the socially constructed racial categories and reinforces social divisions through racial consciousness. Reinforcing Alexander’s (2005) opinion, Maré (2014: 36) argued against the continued racialisation of the South African society through bureaucratic racial categories and calls for their dissolution. Goldberg (2002: 216) argued that despite the ideology of non-racialism espoused by the post-Apartheid state, it ‘reinstate[d] the very racial configurations it is expressly committed to challenging’ by reproducing Apartheid-era racial categories on bureaucratic and administrative forms.
But how do non-citizen individuals living in South Africa, who originated from national origins with different social classification systems experience and react to racialisation by bureaucratic forms? What is ignored in these authors’ arguments is the implication of bureaucratic racial categories on non-South Africans, such as asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants. How are racial categories perceived by non-South African communities for whom the categories were never constructed? Do they accept racialisation by official forms or reject them? It is noteworthy that refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa find themselves confronting numerous forms that they have to fill in including those related to the adjudication of their status (Amit 2011).

Through the experiences of this study’s participants, I would argue that bureaucratic racialisation not only affects South African citizens for whom the racial categories were originally constructed, but extends to refugee and asylum-seeker communities for whom the categories were never created. For individuals who originate from ethnicity-based social classification systems different from South African race-based social differentiation practices, imposed institutional racialisation tends to be resisted. Non-South African communities such as refugees and asylum-seekers, therefore, present new challenges to the racial categories constructed in the Apartheid-era and reproduced in post-Apartheid South Africa. The experiences of the study participants illustrate that for the majority of them, bureaucratic racial classification was seen as an alien and unacceptable practice. Due to their unfamiliarity with imposed racial classification, the participants felt confused and undecided in selecting a racial category and mostly rejected being asked to self-racialise themselves. The categories therefore are facing resistance from non-South African communities and are de-familiarised.

I discuss the findings by conceptually framing the experiences within Omi and Winant’s (1994) racialisation theory and concepts borrowed from Berry’s (1997) acculturation strategies model. Empirically the findings of this chapter are discussed in relation to findings in the US as there is little work in the South African context.

I emphasise how bureaucratic racialisation is individually experienced and understood by the study participants (an ideographic focus) and account for peculiarities and nuances in individual experiences. In addition, I adopt a hermeneutic lens to interpret what the experiences of my study participants meant in relation to my personal experience as a racialised subject by bureaucratic forms, and the possible individual and broader contextual factors that informed and influenced the experiences and reactions of my study participants. The quotations are provided in both Tigrinya and English. Nine study participants encountered racialisation on bureaucratic forms.
Encountering Racialisation on Various Official Forms

Nine (four women and five men) of the study participants cited that they were asked to tick one racial category from a list of categories on bureaucratic forms: African/black, white, coloured, and Indian and other. Participants further stated that their initial encounter with bureaucratic forms which asked for their race, was an experience characterised by confusion as they were unfamiliar with such questions. The numerous institutional forms which my research participants encountered were: application for employment forms, immigration forms, police clearance forms, medical aid forms, scholarship and bursary forms and hospital forms which contained black, white, coloured and Indian racial categories. I have argued that the study participants originate from a socio-cultural context, Eritrea, where bureaucratic forms containing questions of race are absent.

Four of the research participants, who were studying at universities, at the time of the interviews, mentioned that they frequently encountered university admission forms that asked for their racial identities.

Selam, twenty-eight-years old who lives in Durban and a university student, explained to me that it was her first time to be interviewed about racialisation experiences and that she was glad that she would be able to share her experiences with me. Selam recounted that a university admission form asked her to select her racial identity:

When I was filling out the registration forms last year, there was this question that asked for my race. It asked me to select, from a list of [10] population something [population groups], and what surprised me was that it says [said] it was compulsory to answer the question and that it shouldn’t be skipped. After that, it asked for my nationality. For me it was a weird question, you know.

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10 I am aware that there is ‘other’ category in addition to the four South African racial categories; however all the participants did not allude to this option when talking about their racialisation experienced on bureaucratic forms.
Me: Why do you say it was a weird question?

I mean, why would they think that all students normally self-identify in terms of the racial categories found on such forms? Many of us here in this country are from different countries; we do not really know what to do when answering such questions of race, you know.

As a student, who originated from a country of origin whose social classification system is based on non-racial ethno-linguistic based criteria, the discomfort felt by Selam is not surprising. The cultural incompatibility, in terms of social classification systems, between her society of origin (Eritrea) and her society of settlement (South Africa) seems to have shaped her experiences of discomfort when she was confronted with racial categories on university admission forms. From her facial expression during the interview, she appeared confused and disorientated when she uttered the phrase ‘…it is a weird question…’

Yesief, a thirty-years-old male refugee in Cape Town also echoed a similar experience. Before we started the interview, he told me that the interview topic of racialisation experiences in South Africa resonated with his everyday encounters in Cape Town, and that he was excited and happy to recount his experiences to me. Yesief encountered racial categories on university admission forms and it made him feel uncomfortable with and undecided about questions of race on such forms:

Much to your surprise, when I was completing an admission form this year, somewhere at the bottom, there was this question about
race. It asked to select black, Indian, colour [coloured] or white from a list of the races. I paused and paused for a long time before answering, because I felt uncomfortable with such a question of race.

እስ እምሬት እዩ እሆ ከምኡአክለት?
Me: why did you feel uncomfortable?

Well, we Eritreans do not think about race, the way South Africans think about race. When we came here, they force you to select a racial category of their own. It is not easy to select any race on such forms because we didn’t grow up thinking about race. But now that I am here in South Africa, I think I have come to get used to it and be ok with such questions. No need to be confused about such questions anymore.

The above quote is another example of feelings of confusion felt by individuals unfamiliar with notions of racial categorisation. However, in this example, the discomfort was not permanent. The repeated encounter with bureaucratic forms prompted Yesief to normalise the experience. The co-existence of the two mutually exclusive reactions to racialisation reflects Yesief’s past unfamiliarity with racial categorisation and his current ongoing socialization into South African systems of racial categorisation.

Lemlem, a female refugee, who lives in Cape Town and a university student also recounted her experiences of racialisation on scholarship forms:
Yes, I encounter such questions. I encounter that on many forms. For example, you are asked such questions of race scholarship forms. It requires you to check one of the races on the list. Then I ask myself, “Where is my identity reflected in these choices?” Because the available choices are relevant to South Africans only; I say “They don’t represent my identity”. I say “My identity isn’t represented”. But you cannot leave the boxes empty because it is compulsory to check one of the boxes. It makes me feel that I don’t have a choice because you are not free to choose the true identity that describes you. They ask you to tick black, coloured, indian, white.

Racial categorisation on bureaucratic forms was experienced as restrictive and devoid of the social identities Lemlem was accustomed to back in her country of origin. Racial classification is characterized as alien and its extension to and imposition on non-South Africans as coercive and unjustified. Meaning, racial ascription on forms is perceived as a practice that should only be restricted to native South Africans for whom it was originally created.

Berhe also echoed Lemlem’s experience. Berhe, twenty-nine-years old, is a male refugee student and lives in Johannesburg. When I first met him for the interview, he told me that he always talked about the experience of struggling to check a racial category on forms with fellow Eritreans and shared experiences of feeling confused by such unfamiliar categories. He expressed his happiness with the interview encounter stating that he would like to see the results published and the experiences of the racialisation experiences of Eritreans brought to light. Berhe told me that, more than once, he was asked to select one race by scholarship and bursary forms:
Yes, on scholarship or bursary forms. The forms have this question about race asking whether I am black, coloured, Indian, white. As a requirement you are supposed to choose one of the available races. At times, I am undecided when I confront such questions because such questions represent me. In such instances, some questions come to my mind, “Who am I? What is my self-identity?” It makes me feel undecided to answer the question because the question is confusing. But because you have to complete the forms, you just have to select one and forget about it.

In the above experience, the confusion and disorientation experienced by the participant emanated from the imposed pressure by the institutional forms on individuals to self-racialise themselves despite the unfamiliarity of non-citizens with such practices. The absence of Berhe’s preferred identity on such bureaucratic forms prompted this feeling. From Berhe’s experience, it appears that, in this process of structural racial identity imposition, the degree of the study participants’ agency in constructing their own identity is limited and extremely constrained.

My understanding of the encounter with racial categories reported by the above university students is that their encounter with the South African racial categories was made possible as a result of their socio-economic integration and location within the higher education sector. The participants differed in their gender and immigration status (Lemlem is a refugee and Berhe is an asylum-seeker). The students varied in their phenomenological feelings towards their imposed racial classification by university forms. However, for most of the study participants, their experiences were characterised by confusion, disorientation and undecidedness. Only one participant normalised the racialisation encounter.
The experiences of racialisation by the above mentioned participants were also echoed by other study participants who were government employees. These participants were refugees.

Alem, thirty-four-years old, lives in Johannesburg, has a graduate-level educational qualification and works in a government department. I interviewed him at his office during lunch break. I asked Alem about his racialisation experiences on administrative forms:

Now I am used to such kinds of questions. They ask you “Select the race that describes you.” I mean, they ask you “Are you black? Are you india?” etc. At first, when I applied for a job, I was confused as to which one to choose on the employment forms. I didn’t know what race I was, and I couldn’t decide which ones to select. However, over time I became used to such forms.

Me: You mean you encounter forms that ask for your race many times at work?

Yes, on many forms. You know, there are administrative forms that they use for different purposes and on the forms there are many questions such as your name, experiences and educational qualifications. Then you have a question that asks about your race.
So you have no choice but to select one race. Now I am used to such questions and I do not feel confused any more.

The first encounter with racial categories and the attendant confusion felt by Alem seems to reflect the lack of socialisation and familiarity with new racial categories. The routine and repeated encounters with bureaucratic racial categories, however, engendered a sense of familiarity and consequent normalisation of the encounter. Such a normalising attitude by Alem was also previously reflected in Yesief’s subsequent reaction to repeated encounters with racial categories. However, the normalising attitude expressed by Alem appeared to be in stark contrast to the reaction of the racialisation experiences by Lemlem and Berhe, who consistently characterised their confrontation with such categories as confusing and unacceptable.

Merhawit who is twenty-nine and lives in Durban, works in a public sector. She reported that she encountered racial categories on performance assessment forms that she filled out:

I was completing performance assessment forms two months ago and the race question was there. It asked I should select one of the races whether I was “white, black, coloured or indian”? So, ya, I have had that experience.

Me: How did it make you feel when you encountered such race questions?

For us foreigners it can be difficult to select a race, so it really made me uncomfortable to answer such a question. This is because I am
not a South African. Such questions are relevant to South Africans only. Because it reflects their history and their culture, but it [such a question on race] is not relevant to me.

Merhawit’s racialisation experiences also supports the experiences mentioned above, whereby her encounter with racial categories on performance assessment forms was met with feelings of discomfort and undecidedness when asked to check one racial category. Even if Merhawit has lived in the country for more than ten years, she appears to still be rejecting the racial categories found on forms. Merhawit’s experience, however, contrasts with Alem, who has lived in the country for twelve years and who expressed his feelings of familiarity with and normalisation of such racial categories. Merhawit’s rejection of racial self-identification appears to suggest the subjective and unique nature of individual reactions to common experiences of imposed racialisation.

A government employee participant, Girma, also relates his racialisation encounters by bureaucratic forms. Girma, a government employee is thirty-two and lives in Durban. However, his encounters with racial categories were not with administrative forms but with police clearance forms tied to his initial application for employment at a governmental public sector. I asked Girma, about his encounters with racial categories on bureaucratic forms:

Such questions, yes. It happened when I went to the police station for a police clearance. They handed me a form for a fingerprint. So, I had to complete the form and there was this question about my race. I remember. It had four options asking “Are you Indian, white, African/black and coloured?”

Me: How did it make you feel or react when you confronted such questions about your race?
It was a strange feeling. I was hesitant as to which one to choose, can you believe it? Because, as you know, I never encountered such kinds of questions before. I mean one that asks you about your race, etc. No one asked me about such kinds of questions before. Therefore, when I encountered such a question, I was uncomfortable and I got confused. Then you just select that you are black/African just for the purpose of completing the forms. It is really challenging because I had never come across such forms before.

The feeling of hesitation experienced by Girma when confronted with a limited number of racial categories clashed with his sense of self that was not based on one of the categories encountered. This first encounter of racialisation and the subsequent reaction by Girma explains the alien concept of racial categories and unfamiliarity for non-South African individuals with racial self-identifications. The compulsory and coercive nature of selecting a racial category propelled Girma to tick a black racial identity. However, this preference was created in the context of already pre-arranged categories.

The above racialisation experiences of government employees on bureaucratic and administrative forms appear to imply that those experiencing such encounters were refugees as opposed to asylum-seekers. The reason is that formal long-term employment in government departments in South Africa requires that applicants preferably need to have a refugee status permit rather than an asylum-seekers-permit, even if the law states that all refugees and asylum-seekers have the right to work. Therefore, the racialisation experiences of the sampled participants mentioned above appears to be informed by the immigration status of the individuals concerned. Furthermore, the other factor that shaped this experience of racialisation was the professional/skills status of the individuals. Because of their professional background and their location within a privileged socio-economic structure as government employees, therefore, they frequently encounter racial categories on administrative forms.
Some participants also mentioned that they confronted racial categories on other bureaucratic forms such as immigration, medical aid and hospital forms.

Semere, thirty-two-years old male refugee business man, also related that he encountered racial categories for the first time when he went to the Visa Facilitation Services (VFS) offices to apply for his permanent residence. I asked him about his encounter with racial categories on bureaucratic forms:

I am glad you brought up this subject. A few weeks ago, I went to Sandton to apply for my permanent residence permit and they handed me a form to fill in and on that form I was asked, “Are you black, i ndian or coloured?” Then I asked myself ‘Why are they asking me to choose one race’? Why don’t they ask me about my country of origin?” For example, rather than asking me about what race I am, why don’t they ask me about which country I am from?” To me such questions are confusing and especially for us foreigners because we are not South Africans.

Two identity categories collide at the moment of encountering racial categories on forms: the ‘Eritrean’ identity category with which Semere authentically self-identified and South African based racial categories from which he distanced himself. The encounter propelled Semere to internally search for identity categories with which he was familiar. The South African racial categories were, therefore, perceived as alien identities. This experience of racialisation by immigration forms, however, appears to be faced by refugees rather than asylum-seekers, as the latter’s immigration status does not qualify them to apply for permanent residence. The description of the racialisation experienced by Semere reflects the
experiences of his fellow Eritreans discussed above who described their experiences as confusing and their unfamiliarity with questions of race on institutional forms.

The racialisation of Eritreans in South Africa on bureaucratic forms is also recounted by Belay. Belay, a thirty-two-years old male refugee lives in Bellville, Cape Town and is a business man. Belay recounts that he was asked to select a racial category when he was filling out medical aid forms. I asked him about the experience of racial categorisation by forms and how it made him feel:

Yes, I am sure I had encountered about race on forms. When I was filling out forms for medical aid cover, they asked me such questions. I remember, I was faced with such questions. I remember, when I saw such a question I asked myself “Am I black? ‘Am I coloured’? Am I Indian? I didn’t know what to answer, I mean when I first encountered such a question.

Much to you surprise, I didn’t know which one to select. I had a conversation in my head, “Where is my identity represented in these choices?” So honestly speaking, I was not sure what to choose. It is very confusing really; especially when you have never been asked about your race before. But now I normally encounter such a question. Such types of questions are confusing.
The initial encounter with the racial categories produced feelings of confusion and hesitation. This was also experienced by most of the study participants analysed above. What is interesting about this encounter is the dialogue it engendered within the person. This internal conversation appears to exemplify the identity crisis he felt as a result of this encounter. Such a dilemmatic reaction felt when encountering racial categories appears to be because of unfamiliarity with South African racial categories as was illustrated by those participants above. The experiences of internally searching for one’s identity is also evidenced by the experiences of Belay, in the above quotation, who asked herself, ‘who am I?’ when faced with questions of her racial identity on forms.

Liya was pregnant when she encountered racial categories. Liya is a twenty-seven-year old stay-at-home female refugee and lives in Cape Town. She recounted that she found a question that asked for her race when she went to a hospital for a check-up and was told that it was almost her delivery time and that she had to fill out forms in order to be allocated a bed:

I went to this hospital to be allocated a bed as my delivery day was approaching. So the nurse handed me a form; the nurse explained to me that I should fill in the form for purposes of hospitals booking for delivery. So the form asked me about my personal information, such as age, religion etc. Then next on the form it asked me to select my racial category then I was stuck and could not answer.

Me: What did you do then?
Well, I approached the nurse and asked her if I could skip the question on race because I didn’t know which one to choose. The question had options such as “Are you white? Are you black? Are you Indian?” etc. but I didn’t know which one to choose. The nurse insisted that the question shouldn’t be skipped and that it was compulsory that I select one race. It is really confusing. I don’t know why they asked me such a question.

In the above example, Liya’s example shows that hospitals also function as racialisation agents and pregnant women refugees/asylum-seekers are entangled in the process of racialisation on such forms. As Liya related, the compulsory nature of completing such forms forced her to select a racial category even if she resisted answering the ‘race’ question on hospital forms. Such resistance and discomfort experienced with questions of racial self-identification on forms appears to be due to her unfamiliarity with systems of racial classification in South Africa. As was also illustrated by the experiences of other participants, Eritreans in South Africa originate from a culture of self-identification practices based on non-racial practices, hence Liya’s feelings of confusion when encountering race questions is reasonable.

The above theme outlined the racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers when they came into contact with a wide range of bureaucratic forms and how they felt and thought about such an encounter. Next I discuss the results in relation to the literature.

**Discussion**

The nine study participants who recounted their encounters with racialisation on various bureaucratic forms were of varied backgrounds. As was illustrated by the examples above, some of the encounters with institutional bureaucratic forms involved Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers who were socio-economically integrated in the country, such as university students and employees in government departments. The socio-economic position of
participants made it possible for them to interact with institutional bureaucratic forms such as university admission forms, scholarship/bursary forms, administrative and employment forms in government departments and medical aid forms. Some encounters, such as those with immigration forms, were also mediated by the immigration status of the participant involved. In other words, their refugee status allowed a participant to come into contact with immigration forms that asked for their race.

Moreover, the above analysis shows that encounters of the study participants with numerous racialising bureaucratic forms within the South African racial structure appear to be an everyday reality and pervasive. Reactions to being racialised ranged from feelings of resistance, confusion, feelings of being dictated to and controlled, being stuck, being in dilemma, moments of being undecided as to which boxes to tick, and for some others, internalising and normalising such race-based questions.

I can relate to the experiences and reactions of the study participants, as I also encounter racialisation on various bureaucratic forms and due to this familiarity, I understand what it means to encounter imposed racialisation by forms. Even if I have lived in South Africa for some years, I still feel bewildered whenever I face racial categories on forms and at times undecided as to which category to pick.

Theoretically, the encounter of the study participants with racial categories on institutional forms could be understood through Omi and Winant’s (1994) racialisation theory. Omi and Winant (1994) formulated racial formation theory/racialisation theory to makes sense of the racialisation processes that occur at the micro-scale level such as the judging of one’s race between ordinary individuals in social encounters or when individuals encounter other racialising entities such as bureaucratic forms within the United States racial context. Omi and Winant (1994:14) define racialisation processes as ‘the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship or group’. This definition captures the racialisation experiences of the previously racially unclassified study participants by numerous bureaucratic forms, imposing racial designations such as in the case of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa.

The encounter of this study’s participants with bureaucratic could be understood through what Omi and Winant (1994: 14) describe as the utilization of race to identify ‘who a person is’ (emphasis in original) (Omi and Winant (1994: 12). This was done through imposed racial identification by the numerous institutional forms described by the participants.
This ‘extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified’ (Omi and Winant 1994: 14) individuals within the South African bureaucratic racial classification system, was a type of encounter that produced, for most of the participants, resistance and for some passive acceptance of the racialisation process. Some (two) study participants normalised their encounters with racial categories while others delegitimised race-based questions on bureaucratic forms. Generally, the participants’ degree of agency to assert their own chosen identities was constrained by the limited number of boxes available to select. Such lack of agency made them to ‘inhabit’ (Omi and Winant 1994: 55) pre-defined racial categories on bureaucratic forms. This ‘inhabiting of pre-selected racial categories on bureaucratic forms seems to imply for the study participants, that, ‘without a racial identity one is in danger of having no identity’ (Omi and Winant 1994: 12).

Berry’s (1997: 23) concept of compatibility of cultures between the society of origin and the society of settlement applies in understanding the familiarity with and how the study participants responded to race-based classification by bureaucratic forms in South Africa. Berry argued that if immigrants are unfamiliar with socio-cultural identities and practices in their host societies, most of them tend to experience discomfort in quickly adapting to self-identification practices unrelated and incompatible with practices of self-identification in their societies of origin. The study participants originate from a socio-cultural context where social classification is based on ethno-linguistic, ethno-regional and village of origin and that race-based social categorisation systems do not exist in Eritrea. Such divergent systems of classification make the two practices incompatible. Therefore, when most of the study participants, who originate from Eritrea, experienced confusion when faced with questions of race in bureaucratic forms, it was because they were not familiar with racial self-identification practices in South Africa as a result of incompatible self-identificational practices between the two cultures.

Not all the participants, however, felt uncomfortable and resisted racial categorisation on bureaucratic forms. Despite the aspect of incompatibility of social classification practices between the society from which they originate and their host society, Yesief and Alem adapted to and accepted imposed racial classification. Such a pattern does not confirm Berry’s (1997: 23) argument that the factor of cultural incompatibility largely shapes how individuals adapt socio-cultural practices in their settlement societies. This could be explained as Berry (1997: 11) proposed that length of stay in a country of settlement shapes how immigrants adapt to new social identities. Alem had been living in the country for twelve years and Yesief for six years.
As there is little empirical work on experiences and encounters of immigrant/refugees/asylum-seekers with institutional racial categories, I relate the findings of this study to the American literature on experiences of bureaucratic racialisation of immigrants in the U.S. racial order. How these study’s participants responded to their imposed racial classification on bureaucratic forms support the responses of immigrants in a study by Rodríguez (2000). The study by Rodríguez (2000) focused on analyzing how immigrants coming from diverse Latin American national origins with ethnicity-based classification systems responded to questions of ‘race’ on census forms. Rodríguez found that, the majority of the immigrants who originated from a social classification system different from the racial categories found in the U.S. checked ‘other’ distancing themselves from the available U.S.-based racial categories. Rodríguez also notes that many of them wrote in their country of origin as their racial identity, effectively resisting the U.S.-based racialisation system. However, the findings did not reflect the subjective phenomenological experiences of those who responded to the race-questions on the census. The current study has shown that, by gathering the subjective phenomenological experiences of those who responded to race questions on bureaucratic forms, nuanced and complex subjective phenomenological experiences were captured, such as the diversity of reactions and feelings expressed by the study participants.

The experiences of racialisation of the study participants contrasted with the findings of Vargas-Ramos (2014). The author found that Puerto Rican immigrants in the U.S., originating from a racial identification system based on white, black, Asian, Amerindian, Mixed and Other, found it easier to locate themselves within the U.S. bureaucratic racial classification system. This suggests that people who come from race-conscious countries of origin tended to be more accepting of race-questions relative to other newcomers.

In relation to the literature on the experiences of bureaucratic racialisation in the South African context, this study’s findings are original. As I have alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, scholars such as Posel (2001b), Maré (2014), Goldberg (2002) only discussed on the implications of continued institutional racial classification for South Africans. I have not found a study in South Africa that explored the subjective racialisation experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers (or non-citizens) with regards to their encounter with bureaucratic racial categories.

The chapter focused on how Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa experienced racialisation by a variety of administrative/bureaucratic forms. In the next
findings chapter, I present the complex ways in which the study participants experienced racialisation in their everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans.
CHAPTER SIX
EXPERIENCING RACIALISATION IN EVERYDAY SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Introduction
This chapter focuses on how first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa experience racialisation in their everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans.

Predominantly, the literature on the everyday encounters of immigrants/refugees/asylum-seekers with racialisation in their societies of settlement comes from the U.S. Such studies have investigated how immigrants coming from diverse national origins with self-identification systems different from the race-based U.S. self-identification system, experienced racialisation in everyday life.

The literature on racialisation in South Africa mostly focuses on how the state-created practices of racial classification during the colonial, Apartheid, and post-Apartheid eras has shaped racial perceptions in everyday life. The focus of such literature has been on South African citizens. For example, Posel (2001a: 109-110) notes how race thinking is still pervasive in everyday life in post-Apartheid South Africa. Maré (2014: 28) also commented on the status of post-apartheid race-thinking and racialisation of South African citizens in everyday life by noting ‘…we can tell what [race] they are and who belongs to them and that we can use such knowledge in our daily thinking’. Seekings (2008: 2) emphasised that race-consciousness and racialisation in contemporary South Africa continued to be salient features of the South African society. Hamnett (2010: 257) also observes the ‘…continued salience of race in post-Apartheid South Africa.’ Seekings (2008: 5-6) noted that how South Africans in post-Apartheid South Africa racially categorize each other corresponds to the Apartheid-created racial categories. Maré (2001: 82) argued racial consciousness (or race-thinking) in post-Apartheid everyday life became more entrenched as the state continued to retain the categories.

However, immigrants/refugees/asylum-seekers are largely absent as a topic in the analysis of post-Apartheid racialisation experiences. Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar’s (2012) studies on how adolescent immigrants of African and South Asian origin
experienced racialisation by their school peers in their everyday encounters in Johannesburg are important works. My study extends this growing literature: My study focuses on adult refugees and asylum-seekers rather than adolescents; I also have moved beyond the school context and explored racialisation experiences in diverse locations/spaces and social encounters. I also expanded the research cites by conducting studies in Cape Town and Durban in addition to Johannesburg in order to enrich the findings of the study. Furthermore, Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers were not included in Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar’s (2012) studies. Studies on Eritreans in South Africa is important in giving voice to this national origin group by understanding their experiences of racialisation as a community who originated from a non-racial ethno-linguistic based self-identification system.

Drawing on the experiences of this study’s participants, I would argue that racial classification is an everyday reality for non-South African communities such as refugees and asylum-seekers in their social interactions with ordinary South Africans. Even though the racial identities, black, indian, African/black and white were originally constructed to classify the South African society the identities extend from the perceptions of ordinary South Africans, to individuals to whom the identities never applied.

For non-native refugees and asylum-seekers, being racially classified in everyday life creates a sense of discomfort and is difficult to internalise as part of their self-identity as the racial categories were historically constructed for native South Africans. Furthermore, I argue that the racialisation process varies from place to place and from person to person as opposed to being uniform and consistent: Individuals are not necessarily racially perceived and perceptions of racialisation tend to vary across people and space.

In this chapter, a phenomenological account of participants’ lived racialisation experiences by ordinary South Africans is outlined in order to illuminate the nuances and complexities of the experiences of individual participants. I take a hermeneutic stance in making sense of and elaborating on the everyday racialisation experiences of the participants rather than treating the quotations as self-evident illustrations of their experiences.

It should be noted that this chapter draws continuously on racialising terms and phenotypic descriptions, which may be read as an act of racialisation itself. However, I argue that this reflects the everyday practice of racialisation in South Africa. If this language is discomfiting for readers, I suggest it reflects something of the practice itself.

In analysing the interview material, five main distinctions in participants’ racialisation experiences were identified. These are (1) racialised as coloured; (2) racialised as indian; (3)
racialised alternately as Indian and coloured; (4) racialised as black; and 5) what are you? You look racially ambiguous.

Many of the study participants who reported to have particular physical features compatible with what South Africans understood as having a coloured, Indian or black appearance experienced racialisation of their bodies depending on the local and social context in which they were located. For example, those who lived in Cape Town, with predominantly coloured communities, reported being mistaken for coloured; while those who resided in Durban with a larger number of Indian communities reported to have been perceived as Indian. However, those who lived in Johannesburg related that their racialisation experiences were inconsistent and reported that at different times and in interactions with different people, they were mistaken for coloured and Indian alternately. Others reported that they were perceived as black across all urban settings and social contexts. Some participants also recounted that South Africans could not determine what race they were due to their ambiguous physical features. None of the study participants reported that they were perceived as white in their everyday interactions.

A variety of markers informed the racialisation process, such as fluency in English; ability to speak proper Afrikaans, English or indigenous African languages, clothes, hair texture, skin tone, facial features, specific social spaces, and how they carried themselves. More broadly, the geographic region and demographic composition of the urban settings appeared to have shaped and framed the diversity and multiplicity of the racialisation experiences for the study participants. All in all, in certain contexts, 24 participants (seven women and 17 men) reported their everyday racialisation by South Africans in everyday life.

In the analysis, I locate these experiences within Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of racialisation. In order to compare and contrast my findings, I draw on, predominantly, the American empirical literature on the racialisation experiences of immigrants in the U.S. racial context. The justification for using scholarship from the US context is due to the paucity of extensive research in the South African context and the availability of related research in the U.S. context.

Racialised as coloured

Five participants (one woman and four men) living in Cape Town said that ordinary South Africans, in their everyday lives, frequently racialised them as coloured. They cited that
having a particular skin colour, hair texture, facial features and language were the markers that mediated how they were racialised.

Biniam told me about his experience of ‘constantly being misidentified as coloured’ in Cape Town. Biniam is a thirty-years-old male refugee business man living in Cape Town:

What really surprises me is that everywhere in Cape Town people think I am coloured and they speak to me in Afrikaans. I think maybe the reason why they think I am coloured is due to my lighter skin colour and also my face is similar to theirs. In addition, I also have the same hair as theirs, I suppose.

Me: So is that only because of your physical appearance that people think you are coloured?

Because when you have the same physical appearance like me and you happen to be in Cape Town people automatically think you must be coloured because of the similarity in looks. I think I look very coloured.

As the above excerpt illustrates the experience of being perceived as coloured in the city of Cape Town, with predominantly coloured communities, appears to be based on specific physical attributes the participant shares with members of the coloured community in Cape Town. This experience seems to suggest that there are common understandings, by ordinary people in Cape Town, about who should be perceived as coloured based on particular physical markers. Furthermore, beyond the importance of bodily markers in determining the racial membership of an individual, language also operates to be part of the racialisation process. Apart from physical appearance, proficiency in Afrikaans worked as
another determining factor in establishing the racial membership of a person in Cape Town. Initially, however, physical appearance appears to be a ‘common sense’ way of determining the racial category of a person, as illustrated by this excerpt. The intertwinement of the language spoken and physical appearance to make sense of a person’s racial identity seems to be central in the experiences of racialisation for the study participant. This ubiquitous experience seems to reflect that racial thinking in Cape Town appears to be pervasive and ‘routinised’ as an everyday habit of classifying people based on outer phenotype and language.

Another participant, Elias, related that he had made many South African friends, specially coloured people in Cape Town. Elias, twenty-five, is a male refugee business man who has lived in South Africa for four years. He told me that the topic of ‘racialisation’ was a timely topic because he always encountered being mis-identified as coloured in Cape Town, and even by his fellow Eritreans:

I think Cape Town is saturated with people who look like me that is why people always think I must be coloured. Everywhere I go people speak to me in Afrikaans. I think now I should probably learn Afrikaans so that to be able to assimilate into the coloured people; because I am tired of explaining to people that I am not coloured and telling them about my country of origin. People who do not know me automatically think that I must be coloured and they are surprised when I tell them that I am not coloured. People in Cape Town think am one of them because I have the same physical appearance as them. We all look alike here. People only realise that
I am not coloured when they hear my English accent. I cannot speak English the way coloureds do.

Elias also reinforces the racialisation experiences described by Biniam by recounting how physical appearance and language intersect with each other in the everyday racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in Cape Town. In addition to proficiency in Afrikaans, a particular style of speaking English also played a role in establishing whether a person was coloured. This experience suggests that phenotype, Afrikaans and English, in combination, operated as central to the racialisation experiences.

Specific spaces frequented by coloured people, such as clubs were also important social contexts in the racialisation process of the study participants as illustrated below.

Filimon told me that he normally socializes with people he identified as coloured in Cape Town. Filimon is a twenty-four-years old male refugee business man in Cape Town. He echoes racialisation experiences by Elias and Biniam when asked about his encounters with racialisation in Cape Town:

Here in Cape Town we Eritreans are seen as members of the coloured community because of our looks, I think. When people interact with us they do so thinking that we must coloured. Even when black South Africans interact with me they assume that I must coloured. It is only after I started speaking English with an accent that they realise that I am not coloured. But I think these days I have managed to speak English like coloureds do and people might think I am coloured. The problem is I am not good at Afrikaans because coloured speak Afrikaans fluently. I also often go to clubs.
frequented by coloured people, and when I am there people automatically assume I must be coloured.

What is interesting about Filimon’s account is that he believed that coloured people in Cape Town have a distinct and predictable way of speaking English; hence his endeavour to attain that ‘standard’. From his experience, one’s inability to speak English in a particular way exposed his non-colouredness. Furthermore, Filimon notes that his lack of fluency in speaking Afrikaans also precluded him from becoming completely invisible within the coloured community in Cape Town.

The following example is unique in that, in addition to similarity in phenotype, the participant claims to have mastery of the Afrikaans language, way of dressing and acting coloured. According to him the adoption of linguistic and behavioural attributes made him indistinguishable from any other ‘coloured’ person in Cape Town.

When I met Asmerom, I was really impressed when, in the middle of our conversation, before the interview, he was speaking to someone else in Afrikaans. Asmerom is a male refugee student who has lived in South Africa for ten years. He was the only Eritrean whom I met who could speak Afrikaans since I came to South Africa. I asked him how he did that and he told me that he loved speaking Afrikaans and that interest prompted him to learn the language quickly. I conducted the interview in a quiet restaurant in downtown Cape Town:

Of course, people always think I must be coloured because I speak good Afrikaans. In addition to that, I have been living in this city for over ten years now. And unless I told people that I am from Eritrea they can’t to tell me apart from other coloured people here in Cape Town. When I go to Bellville to see my coloured friends, everyone thinks I must be coloured like them because I dress like coloured people here in Cape Town and walk and act everything like them.
Me: So people here cannot distinguish you from coloured people?

Yes, people think I must be coloured because I look like them. Cape Town is a city with too many coloured people. We have the same looks as them. In addition to that, I speak Afrikaans so I am automatically assumed to be coloured here in Cape Town.

The quote suggests the interlinking of language fluency and physical appearance in the everyday racialisation processes in Cape Town. However, the racialisation experience of Asmerom is peculiar when compared with other participants. This is because, due to their inability to speak proper Afrikaans, the other participants were visible and eventually seen as non-coloured by people in Cape Town. In Asmerom’s case, as a result of his linguistic mastery of Afrikaans and other attributes perceived to be representing coloured people in Cape Town, he could decide to be invisible. He was perceived to be coloured even when he spoke, due to his Afrikaans fluency. Interestingly, his fluency in Afrikaans allowed Asmerom to phenotypically assimilate into the coloured identity.

Simret presented a unique account of her experience. Simret, twenty-six, is a female refugee university student. She told me that when she frequently goes to public places in Cape Town, such as shops, people always assumed she must be coloured due to her phenotype. When I asked her to elaborate on her experience of being racialised as coloured in Cape Town, she describes her experiences in the following way:
You know what, when I wear my traditional Habesha\textsuperscript{11} clothes, I think people here can see that I must be from some other country and not from South Africa. In such instances, people do not perceive me as coloured or Indian. But what is surprising is that when I wear my hair like the locals here and wear ‘modern’ clothes and go to shops to buy stuff, then all of a sudden they speak to me in Afrikaans. Then when I respond to them in English saying ‘I don’t understand’, then they say, ‘Oh sorry, I thought you were coloured because you look like one’. So if you don’t want to be mistaken for a coloured woman here in Cape Town, you should wear traditional Habesha clothes so that they know you are a foreigner and not from here.

Simret’s experience, however, has an additional feature in that, apart from physical appearance as a marker of racialisation, wearing ethnic traditional clothes disrupted the racialisation process as her visibility as a foreigner was apparent due to exotic outfits she wore. This suggests that in the perception of people in Cape Town, racial judgement of a person is mediated and informed by clothes worn, in addition to phenotype.

**Racialised as Indian**

Five participants (three women and two men) in Durban related that, on many occasions, people do not differentiate them from South African Indians in Durban due to their facial features, skin tone and hair texture. Predominantly, those who were racialised as Indian were women rather than men.

As a business woman, Saron’s social life with local South Africans in Durban was active. Saron, a female refugee, is twenty-eight and is a business woman in Durban. She was happy to meet me for the interview about her racialisation experiences, and I conducted the interview in the yard of an Eritrean restaurant. Saron spent her weekdays selling clothes and

\textsuperscript{11} Traditional Habesha clothes (known as ‘Netsela in Tigrinya) is unique traditional attire worn by women in Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is an ankle-length white dress with embroidery running, in the middle, from the chest to the ankle; and embroidery around the end of the sleeves.
her days appeared to be busy with customers, most of them local South Africans. When I asked Saron about her racialisation experiences, she recounts her experience as:

I was surprised one day when a woman asked me if I had ever been to my ancestral homeland, India. When I told her I wasn’t Indian, she couldn’t believe it. The woman said, touching my hair, “look at your beautiful hair and your cute face, you must be Indian.” I was surprised. But at the same time, I wasn’t surprised because that wasn’t the first time that people mistook me for an Indian woman. Many times people think I am Indian. One day a guy asked me, “Do you Indian women ever date blacks?” So, if you are in Durban and have Indian looks, you should always expect to be mistaken for an Indian woman, because that is the fact here.

Me: So are you saying it is your appearance that makes people think that you must be Indian?
Yes, many times it is like that. As you know, some of us Eritrean women have hair similar to Indian women here in Durban. I mean, they have straight hair. If you have observed, we look like Indians. That is why people cannot differentiate between native Indians in Durban and some of us foreigners who live in Durban who look like Indians.

Similarity in physical appearance to Indians in Durban made Saron to be perceived as Indian in her everyday social interactions with people in Durban. Certain physical markers such as hair type and facial features were central in the racialisation process. What is interesting is that, even if Saron responded to her mis-classification as Indian by emphasising her non-South African origin and distancing herself from an Indian racial category, people still insisted that she looked too Indian to resist it. From Saron’s account, it appears that, despite their background and origin, individuals’ phenotype associated with a socially understood ‘Indian’ racial category, inevitably became racially perceived as Indian South Africans. The association of Saron with being a ‘cute’ Indian suggests that there maybe a positive valence towards an Indian racial identity.

Haimanot earns a living as a business woman. Haimanot is a twenty-six-years old female refugee business woman in Durban. We knew each other before the interview, and I conducted the interview with her at her residence:

Here in Durban, South Africans think I must be Indian because of my hair and my face. Most of the time, it is black South Africans who think that I must be Indian looking at my hair and facial features. Even some Indians think that I must be Indian. I think it is because I have the same hair as Indian woman that Indians think I must be Indian. They are surprised when I tell them that I am
Eritrean and not Indian. They still wonder “Do they say you are Indian in Eritrea?”

What is unique about Haimanot’s racialisation experience is the tendency for people to understand the Indian racial category as a universal label and believing that individuals with Indian phenotype must be categorized as Indians outside South Africa. This mistaken perception suggests that, some ordinary South Africans seem to believe that the Indian category could be a globally ubiquitous racial category outside South Africa. Haimanot rejected the socially imposed Indian identity as a category that did not reflect her self-identity.

Nathreth recounted how racialisation as Indian is an everyday encounter. Nathreth is a twenty-four-years old female refugee university student in Durban. She has many South African friends whom she met at the college where she studied and she socialises with other South Africans, too. She stated that when she was in the company of other Indians in Durban, people automatically assumed she must be Indian due to her phenotypic similarity to her Indian friends.

Many times people in Durban think I must be Indian. Even when I am walking in the street with my other Indians friends people automatically assume I must be Indian because I look Indian and they see Indians who look like me in my company. I also think it is because I have a narrow nose and long hair. My hair isn’t wavy as other Eritreans; I look typical Indian in my appearance.

Me: So you think they perceive you as Indian because of your hair and you nose?
Yes indeed. I think, if you have observed, most of the Indian women here in Durban have the same hair and face as mine. As you know, there are so many Indians in Durban, that is why, maybe, people cannot differentiate me from other Indians in Durban. The reason is we look alike. Especially when I am in the company of other Indian women, you cannot distinguish me from them.

The example suggests that, physical appearance coupled with being seen around other Indians in Durban automatically produced a perception, on the part of South Africans, that everyone must be Indian. Such experience reveals that one could easily pass for Indian when in the company of other Indians in Durban. What is important here is the impression created, on the part of South Africans, when Indian-looking Eritreans are seen in the company of native South African Indians.

Besides the experiences of racialisation as Indian by female study participants, there were also males who experienced being seen as Indian in their everyday social interactions with local South Africans in Durban like Alamin. He is a male refugee business man in Durban.

What is unique about the racialisation experience of Alamin is that, due to a combination of his phenotypic similarity to native Indians in Durban and Muslim dress, people automatically mistook him for being Indian.
the company of other Indians in mosques, people think I must be Indian because my appearance is similar to them.

Me: Does this happen to you always?

You can say every day. I am sure if I work on my English and accent, you definitely will not tell me apart from any other Indians in Durban. Everywhere I go people assume that I must be Indian because of my Muslim dress code and I look like them; I wear a long Muslim dress. They cannot believe me when I tell them that I am originally from Eritrea. They tell me that one of my parents back in Eritrea must be Indian. It is also, maybe, because of the fact that Durban is full of Indian people and when you happen to have the same physical appearance as Indian, they perceive you as Indian.

Alamin was indistinguishable from other Indians when he found himself in the midst of other Indians in mosques. Such invisibility appears to be possible both as a result of phenotypic similarity to Indians in Durban and particular social spaces such as mosques that seemed to have a predominantly Indian presence. Another interesting aspect of the racialisation experiences of Alamin was wearing a particular type of dress — a Muslim dress code— which marked him as Indian in Durban. However, the experience of invisibility for Alamin as Indian appears to be short lived due to his inability to speak good English and his accent.
Temesgen described his racialisation experiences in Durban as an everyday routine due to his physical appearance similarity to Indians in Durban. Temesgen is a male asylum-seeker business man in Durban. In his perception, there is a particular way of being Indian:

Ya. I am always presumed to be Indian, that is why I decided to have an Indian girl friend. She is teaching me Indian way of talking and acting so that I become indistinguishable. I have the same look but the way I talk and the way I act I am not like them.

Me: So people always perceive you as Indian?

I mean look at me, if I hadn’t told you anything about myself you would definitely have thought I am Indian because in my physical appearance I look like them. But I do not mean to say that all Eritreans look like Indians, as you well know. Some of us are darker, some of us are lighter, and those of us who look like Indians we are assumed to be Indians. This is an obvious thing.

Corroborating the racialisation experiences of other Eritreans as Indian in Durban, Temesgen also describes his racialisation experiences as Indian to be pervasive. However, according to him, the fact that he lacks certain perceived characteristics, such as a particular way of talking and acting Indian prevented him from being indistinguishable from other Indians in Durban. In his account, Temesgen essentialises and naturalises the Indian racial category as if there were an exclusive way of talking and acting Indian. For him, therefore, he...
aspires to live up to those perceived standards of being Indian in order to seamlessly pass as Indian in Durban.

**Racialised alternately as Indian and Coloured**

Five of the participants (one woman and four men) who reported being perceived alternately as Indian and Coloured were based in Johannesburg. Their racialisation experiences were shaped by social contexts and with whom they were interacting. Suárez-Orozco (2004: 177-178) argued that ‘the social context is essential in which identity is foreshadowed’ for immigrants in their host societies. She also noted that, at times, identity and the phenomenon of categorising people tend to be ‘fluid and contextually driven’. The study participants who resided in Johannesburg and reported to have phenotypes similar to Coloured and Indian had inconsistent racialisation experiences. Their racialisation oscillated between being perceived as Coloured and Indian at different times and when they interacted with different people. Both male and female study participants encountered such an experience.

I knew Alemitu before the interview; and we would always talk about how we Eritreans get confused with being Indian, Coloured or at times black South Africans. Alemitu is a twenty-one-year-old female university student in Johannesburg. I conducted the interview at her residence, and Alemitu recounted her racialisation experiences in Johannesburg as follows:

What is surprising is that one time I am seen as Indian and another time I am perceived to be Coloured. I do not really understand why. Why is that people see two appearances in me. One day, when I was in a taxi coming to town from Yeoville this guy who was seated...
beside me, asked me “Are you indian?” Then on another occasion, I remember, I was going to Pretoria by Gautrain and there were these ladies seated next to me and said something in Afrikaans. I didn’t understand what they were saying and I indicated to them that I didn’t understand what they were talking about. Then one of the ladies said to me that she thought I was coloured and that they were asking me in Afrikaans where they should get off because they were going to Marlboro.

Alemitu’s example of being racialised differently on two different occasions seems to suggest that ‘common sense’-based racial categorisation of South Africans, in everyday social encounters, is fraught with inconsistencies. Two social contexts and interactional situations, on the train and in a taxi, produced two distinct experiences of being categorised both as indian and coloured. It appears, therefore, that, in everyday life, racial boundaries tend to be not clearly defined replete with ambiguities as was demonstrated by Alemitu’s everyday racialisation experience. Meaning, the inconsistent ways of everyday racial classification experienced by Alemitu reveals that, in everyday life, the boundaries between the socially constructed indian and coloured racial identities seem to be blurred and not clear cut.

Another study participant, Yohannes, told me that he was more often mis-identified as indian and coloured and was glad that I brought up the issue in the form of an interview. Yohannes is twenty-eight and a male asylum-seeker business man. The unstable and inconsistent patterns of the racialisation experiences of Yohannes, further reinforces Alemitu’s experience. In response to the question about his racialisation experiences Haile said, “ስባት እንታይ ክርግጠ ከል ይህ። ከምስ በቃ ህንዱ ወዱ ከምዖይወጻ ይነግራኒ። ምኽንያቱ ይመስሇኒ በቃ ህንዱ ስሇዛመስሇን ዩ፡ በቃ ህንዱ ስሇዘ ኣነ ህንዱ ኣይኮንኩን ኽብሌ ጦቕ ኢሇ። በቃ ህንዱ ህንዱ ረንዱ ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ይርስ የሚመስሇኒ ያብቃ ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራኒ። ያስ ኢሇ። ህንዱ ረንዱ የህን የሽማን ከምዖ ይነግራን
What I mean is that many times people think I must be Indian or they think I must be coloured. Sometimes when I try to propose to South African women they tell me that they don’t go out with an Indian man. Because I think they mistake me for an Indian guy. And since it has happened to me so many times I am tired of explaining to people that I am not Indian. I just ignore it. At other times, coloured people greet me in Afrikaans but I keep quiet because I don’t know how to respond to them in that language. I think they perceive me as coloured.

问我：这样的经历在哪里发生？

我：在哪里发生？

Well everywhere you go. I mean it depends with whom you are interacting. Some people see coloured in me, and others see Indian in me. Now I am used to this. When this happens, I don’t see the reason why I have to explain to them about my origin; because to how many people will I keep on explaining that I am not Indian or coloured. This happens to me always.

The inconsistent aspects of the everyday racialisation experiences of the study participants is also demonstrated in Yohannes’ example in which he explicitly describes his being racially categorised differently as an everyday routine. Different people perceived different racial identities in a single body.
In the following quote, particular social spaces played an important role in how individuals were racially perceived by ordinary South Africans.

Senai told me that he had not shared his racialisation experiences with anyone else because, according to him, he thought that maybe the experience was peculiar to him. Senai is a male asylum-seeker business man in Johannesburg. Senai told me that he was perceived as both Indian and coloured countless times’ and that he could not understand why people saw two identities in him. When I asked him to elaborate on his everyday racialisation experiences, Senai said:

There is this bar that I always go to drink beer and it is frequented by coloured people. I have a lot of friends there, I mean, a lot of those coloured people who come to the bar to drink. When I went to the bar for the first time, those coloured saw me there thought I was coloured. This is because, I think, when they saw my appearance I looked like them. Then I have started learning some Afrikaans words from them. I even have a coloured girlfriend who frequents there. I mean we look alike.

Me: So people always perceive you as coloured in Johannesburg?

No. At other times, in everyday encounters with people they ask me “Are you Indian?” They get confused because to some I look
coloured while to others I look indian. I don’t know, maybe I look both. Much to your surprise, even my Eritrean friends told me the same thing, that wherever they go people perceive them as both coloured or indian.

The different ways of being identified as indian and coloured, at different times, is also demonstrated by Senai’s account. However, what is important in Senai’s racialisation experience is that his racialisation encounters with the experience occurred in a particular social context, a pub, which was frequented by predominantly coloured people. What makes the racialisation experiences of Senai interesting is that even if he disclosed his foreign origin and non-colouredness, this visibility as a person of foreign origin did not prevent the coloured South Africans from categorising him as coloured because of his phenotypic similarity to them.

Akberet also recounted how she was perceived as both indian and coloured by ordinary South Africans in her everyday social encounters. Akberet is a female asylum-seeker business woman who has lived in South Africa for seven years and lives in Johannesburg.

So many, so many times. I am surprised you are aware of that. You know, South Africans have the tendency to view people in race terms. I don’t understand why they have such tendency. Many times black South Africans ask me when I am at a hair salon. They ask me whether or not my home town was Durban. The reason why they ask me such questions is because they assumed I am indian. One day a woman said to that I have nice indian hair.
No. On numerous occasions, they also think I must be coloured. I don’t know why. But many black South Africans think I must be Indian and at other times they view me as coloured. I think they don’t know that many of us Eritreans are similar in appearance to so many South Africans and they shouldn’t think we share the same identity with them. People get confused as to whether I am Indian or coloureds. Maybe they should educate them that despite our difference in appearance, we are all the same. They shouldn’t say “You look like this or like that”.

Akberet’s irregular racialisation experiences appear to further demonstrate the indeterminate nature of racial classification of people by everyday South Africans. The other dimension of Akberet’s racialisation encounters was her resistance to her being racially categorised. She invalidated the everyday racial categorisation practices by ordinary South Africans. Even if the practice of racial categorisation is a routine habit for South Africans, such a social habit was rejected as alien by Akberet. Her experiences, interestingly, reveals that, for some South Africans, the Indian racial category is associated with a positive identity.

Eyasu is another participant who recounted about the phenomenon of alternately being perceived as Indian and coloured. Eyasu lives in Johannesburg and a male refugee university student. We had always talked about our racialisation experiences prior to the interview. When I told him I was conducting interviews for my doctoral thesis, he was willing to be a participant and even helped me recruit other potential participants. I conducted the interview with him at his residence. Eyasu recounted his experiences of being racially categorized by ordinary South Africans in the following way:
On many occasions, black South Africans mistake me for an Indian and coloured. “Are you Indian?” is the kind of question that I always confront, when I meet people from this country, I mean. Not only that, at other times, in this country, many people perceive me coloured. For example, Last week when I went to East Gate shopping mall to buy something, a white clerk at a certain shop spoke to me in Afrikaans thinking that I was coloured, I suppose. Of course she couldn’t think I am white because I don’t look white. As you know, I am in between. I mean people think I am mixed like coloured people and that is why they speak to me in Afrikaans.

Me: Why do you think at different times, people perceive you as Indian and as coloured?

This could be because my physical appearance confuses them. I mean, to some I might look Indian, and to others I might appear coloured. But honestly speaking, up until now I don’t know why they tend to see two races in me, I mean in one person; very surprising, ya?
As illustrated in this excerpt, in everyday social encounters, both black and white South Africans perform the practice of racially categorizing others. Eyasu rules out the possibility of his being perceived as white. Meaning, Eyasu’s phenotype fell outside a white racial identity in South Africa.

**Racialised as Black**

Those study participants who reported having a black phenotype commented that in the three urban spaces — Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town — they were perceived as black African by local South Africans. All in all, six participants, all of them men, recounted their racialisation as black. The participants did not report being mistaken for either coloured or Indian in their everyday social interactions with local South Africans. Furthermore, none of the female study participants reported being racially categorised as black in their everyday social encounters with ordinary South Africans. All of the study participants who reported being racially perceived as black were male participants. The racial boundary of the socio-historically created black African racial category in South Africa was delineated based on physical appearance (Posel 2001a: 56). Such a category was particularly entrenched during the Apartheid era by normalising the black racial construct in everyday lived experience which Goldberg (2002: 115) called the ‘routinisation’ practice of socio-politically created racial categories. The experience of being seen as black, therefore, I would argue, tends to draw on such a normalised common-sense understanding of what a black person is supposed to look like.

In Durban, some Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers reported that, they frequently were racially categorised and perceived as black South Africans due to their phenotype. Their experience, therefore, differed from their other fellow Eritreans who resided in Durban with them, who reported being racially perceived as Indian South Africans. This was due to their perceived phenotypic similarity to blacks in South Africa,

Zerihun was known to me before I interviewed him. Zerhun is a twenty-seven-year old male refugee business man living in Durban. He has lived in South Africa for five years. I remember him telling me that, most of the time, South Africans mistook him for a black South African and that his phenotype was the reason for the perception that South Africans had about him. He described his lived experience in the following way:

አንግንይመስሇኒኣጸቢቐንጸሇምቲዯቡብኣፍሪቃውያንእየዛመስሌምኽንያቱመሌክዏይስሇዛመሳሰለ።አብዯርባንበቃአብዖዛኸዴክዎሰባትናዒይเกือบ鲁’m

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I think I look more like black South Africans because I look like them in my physical appearance. Here in Durban people think I am black where ever I go. I think it is because of my very darker skin colour, my face and my kinky hair is similar to those of black South Africans. When I tell them that I don’t think about race that you people in South Africa are familiar with and race does not represent me, they tell me that I must be delusional because they say that my phenotype is similar to black South Africans. Many people speak to me in Zulu and I tell them that I did not understand them. One guy asked me “Aren’t you black South African? Because to me you are black, which country are you from?” Perhaps it is because of my skin and appearance that they perceive me as black.

Me: Do people also perceive you as Indian or coloured?

Me: Do people also perceive you as Indian or coloured?
No my friend. They have never perceived me as coloured or Indian. Because these Indian people have straight hair and sharp facial features and most of those called coloured people have soft hair and they have lighter skin colour. As you can see me I do not have such an appearance. I mean many Eritreans have lighter skin colour and curly hair and other have straight hair. However, some of us Eritreans have darker skin tone and our hair is like black people and that is why people think I must be black. But we don’t think about race stuff in Eritrea.

In the above excerpt, the racial classification of Zerihun as black by ordinary South Africans was based on his phenotypic similarity to other black South Africans. This finding reflects the salience of physical appearance in determining the racial category of a person in everyday day South African society. Zerihun’s excerpt further illustrates that, even if he rejected being racially perceived as black and dissociated himself from a South African black category, his resistance was challenged by his South African interlocutor that his phenotype inextricably tied him to a black racial category. Furthermore, Zerihun’s example suggests that individuals that are socially perceived as black South Africans, due to their perceived phenotype, appear to not be perceived as coloured or Indian.

Haile, a twenty-six-year old business man in Johannesburg, also recounted about his everyday racialisation experiences as black by ordinary South Africans.
last month when I went to a restaurant to order food and a certain waitress came to me to take an order and spoke to me in Zulu. I asked “Why is that everywhere I go people speak to me in Zulu?” She said “even myself I thought you were a black South African”. I think it is because I have African hair and I look very dark dark, I don’t know.

Me: Do some South Africans perceive you as coloured or indian?

How could they think I am indian or coloured when my appearance is different from them? I am sure an indian or coloured person doesn’t have a black African hair or dark skin colour like me. People always perceive me as a black South African.

The excerpt illustrates the boundary of blackness in the social imaginary of South Africans in everyday life. Meaning, particular physical markers such as hair texture and skin colour are interpreted as constituting blackness. For an individual possessing such socially meaningful markers, the possibility of experiencing racialisation as indian or coloured tends to be absent. Within the racialisation experience as black, an ethnicisation process is also at work, in which an individual is perceived to be a member of one of the South African ethnic groups. Racialisation and ethnicisation processes, therefore, operate in combination.

Some of the study participants residing in Johannesburg also reported that they, at all times, were perceived as ‘black’ due to their phenotypic similarity to other black South Africans. Bereket a male asylum-seeker businessman describes his racialisation experiences as the following:
Back in Eritrea people did not see me as black. But here in this country I am seen as black because of how I look. My face looks like the blacks of this country, I think. Even my hair is like black people that is why people perceive me as black. One day a guy in town asked me ―Are you Venda?‖ Then I said to him that I wasn’t and I was not even a South African. He responded ―I thought you were a South African and a Venda.‖ Maybe I think it is because of my hair and my facial features. When I was in my own country no one told me that I was black. But here in this country people perceive me as black because of my appearance, I think.

Me: So in your interactions with people do people have view you as indien or coloured?

How can they think I am coloured or indien? This is because I do not look like them. In this country people do not see me as indien or coloured, instead they perceive me as a black South African. On numerous occasions people here speak to me in their own language thinking that I must be one of them.

Corroborating Haile’s experience, being socially seen as black constitutes possessing certain physical markers, such as hair texture. The experience also suggests ethnicisation at work together with the racialisation experience as black. Integral to this experience is the
deployment of indigenous South African languages as a litmus test to determine the race and ethnicity of individuals. Being perceived as black is experienced as foreign to the self-concept of the participant.

Adam told me prior to the interview that he started to think about race when he came to South Africa and that made him uncomfortable. Adam is twenty-six male refugee and has live in South Africa for three years and lives in Johannesburg. He said that his racial experience as black was an everyday occurrence:

Here in South Africa, because of my appearance, people think I am a black South African. The surprising thing is that even when I am in the company of other Eritreans, people of this country selectively speak to me in Tswana or Zulu thinking that I must be one of them. It has happened to me so many times. I think it is because of my appearance that they think about me that way. I am way darker than other Eritreans. My hair is always shaved that is why, I think, South Africans can’t differentiate me from other black South Africans.

Me: Apart from seeing you as black, do people perceive you as indian or coloured?

People have never perceived me as indian or coloured. Maybe the reason might be because I do not look like them. By looking at me...
people of this country think I am a black South African due to my appearance. Many South Africans here speak to me in their own languages at first before I started talking. Maybe because I always shave my head and my skin tone is very dark. It is because of this they see me as a black South African.

Adam’s racialisation experience occurred by way of an indigenous South African language. People perceived to be black South Africans are assumed to have knowledge of South African indigenous languages, such as Tswana or Zulu. Furthermore, the account by Adam reveals that, for those who are marked as black in everyday life, the possibility of being seen as either indian or coloured appears to be non-existent. Adam’s subjective racialisation experience is an illustration that physical attributes of a person and language shaped how an individual is racially perceived in the contemporary context of the South African society. In everyday life, the boundary of a black identity is marked as distinct from the coloured and indian identities through certain physical attributes.

In Cape Town, some of the study participants also reported that they experienced being perceived as black due to their perceived phenotypic similarity to other black South Africans.

Asgedom, a thirty-one-years old refugee business man from Cape Town, related to me that he always talked about his racialisation experiences with other fellow Eritreans and that his fellow Eritreans also divulged a similar experience. Asgedom told me that he was always marked as a black South African in Cape Town:
Me: Why do you think people perceive you as a black South African?

It is obvious. I look black like them. You can look at my hair and my facial appearance. My hair is very similar to that of black South Africans. Not only that but also my general appearance is like them. My skin colour isn’t too dark as you can see. It is lighter like Xhosa people, but my hair is like other black South Africans. Maybe they look at the type of my hair and conclude that I must be black.

Me: So do people also view you as coloured or Indian?

No, as you can see me, I don’t think so because I am way darker than the so called coloured. Up until now no one thought I was coloured or Indian.

Possessing a particular type of hair is associated with being perceived as a black South African. The example also illustrates that being seen as a black South African automatically presumes having an ethnic membership. This was also experienced by other study participants above and reinforces the argument that, for those perceived as black, their presumed ethnicity also surfaces through the deployment of indigenous languages in the interactions.

The next excerpt also shows the intersectionality of physical appearance and language in the racialisation process of the study participants as black.
Negash is a twenty-seven-years old male refugee business man in Cape Town and recounted his experiences of racialisation by local South Africans in his daily social interactions:

Here in Cape Town South Africans think of me as a South African, i mean they think of me as a black South African. A lot of people think of me that way. Because I think to a lot of people, I appear a black South African to many people here. I suppose it is because of my physical appearance which is similar to them blacks that they automatically think I must be black like them. Either they talk to me in Xhosa or Zulu everywhere I go. It is really surprising because my own brother is very light skinned and looks more like coloured in Cape Town, he looks different from me. So in South Africa I am seen as black while my brother is perceived as coloured. This is really surprising. The same brothers but people perceive us as having different racial identities. We always talk about this experience with my brother.
Not yet. I am always seen as a black person in this country. Because I think South Africans perceive me as black due to my appearance. Since I do not have a look that resembles that of indians and coloureds, people do not perceive me as indian or coloured. Always people view me as black.

The account by Negash, who resides in Cape Town, in the above quotation, also exemplifies how physical appearance and language operate hand in hand in the everyday encounters with racialisation of the study participants. What is interesting about Negash’s account is the different ways he and his brother were racially perceived by ordinary South Africans. Even if the two are biological brothers, Negash was racially categorised as black while his brother was racially perceived as coloured due to their dissimilar physical appearance. This example presents an instance in which even family members, with different physical appearances, tend to be racially perceived differently and slotted into different racial categories by ordinary South Africans. Such an experience is absent back in Eritrea where phenotype-based racial classification of individuals is non-existent.

What are you? You look racially ambiguous

Compared to those who were racialised as either coloured, indian or black, a minority of the study participants (one woman and two men) also reported that their ambiguous physical appearances confused ordinary South Africans as to which racial category they belonged to. For such individuals, their physical appearance was perceived as racially indeterminate and outside the four South African racial categories: coloured, white, indian and black. Because of this exception, confusion arose on the part of everyday South Africans as to where to locate such physically ambiguous individuals within the socially understood available racial categories in South Africa. The racialisation experiences of this small number of study participants, therefore, was not related to being racially categorized as black, coloured or indian as was illustrated by the majority of the study participants but as individuals with ambiguous racial features. The ambiguity and mixed-ness reported by the participants do not connote a ‘coloured’ racial identity as was noted by scholars such as Posel (2001a: 56) and Norval (1996: 119), but a notion of racial mixture socially perceived as an exotic racial category. Omi and Winant (1994: 12) argue that, when members of race-conscious cultures
‘…cannot conveniently racially categorize…’ individuals with ambiguous physical appearance, those who categorise experience ‘…a crisis of racial meaning….’ In other words, for members of the larger society, their common-sense conceptions of racial categories are challenged when they encounter individuals with racially ambiguous physical appearance.

Shewit is a twenty-four-year old female refugee university student in Johannesburg. She has lived in South Africa for five years. I asked her whether she experienced being categorised racially in her everyday social interactions:

I think to South Africans my appearance confuses them, I mean as to what race I am. The people of this country have a habit of racially classifying people. When they see me they get confused as they are not sure from which race I am. As you can see me I am very light-skinned and have a long and straight hair but I have facial features similar to black Africans. They ask me if my parents are a mixture of many races. I don’t know, maybe they expect you to have certain meaningful physical appearance that make sense to them in order to easily classify you as a particular race. But as you already know we Eritreans come in diverse physical appearances. And because the physical appearance of some of us is peculiar, it confuses the people of this country.

The experience of being racialised as ambiguous is met with rejection on the part of the participant. The example suggests that individuals with certain phenotypes, falling outside the socially meaningful racial identities, pose a difficulty for ordinary South Africans, in reading what racial identities such individuals are assumed to possess. The tendency to give a racial
meaning to one’s bodily features is a meaningless social practice in Eritrea from which the participant originated.

The experience of being perceived as a racially ambiguous racial subject was further corroborated by another study participant’s account, Selemun. Selemun is a twenty-five year old male refugee business man in Johannesburg. He has lived in South Africa for four years.

People in this country cannot easily say I belong to a definite race because my skin tone is very dark and my hair is curly and this combination confuses South Africans. The reason is the people of this country expect that when you have very dark skin colour they expect you to have kinky hair. Therefore, my look confuses them always. That is why they ask me if I am a mixture of races.

Echoing Shewit’s experiences of being racially perceived as ambiguous, Selemun also describes a similar experience in his everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans. A combination of particular physical attributes is mentioned as markers of racial ambiguity, such as having a dark skin and a long wavy hair. The excerpt illustrates that when physically ambiguous non-South African newcomers enter the race-conscious South African society, ordinary South Africans tend to have difficulty categorising such individuals in terms of the South African racial categories which make sense to them.

The racialisation of physically ambiguous individuals, as mixture and indeterminate, is also reflected in the experiences of Kifle. Kifle is a male asylum-seeker business man in Cape Town:
As you know I have kinky hair, my nose is thin and long nose and I have Indian facial features and people want to know if I am a mixture of white, Indian and black. I tell them that there are so many Eritreans who have the same confusing appearance and a look difficult to classify in racial terms. When I also tell them that we do not think about race, they can’t believe me.

Me: Why do you think they can’t believe you?

Because they want to know what race I am because my appearance confuses them. I mean here in South Africa people look at your appearance and ascribe you a racial category. But we foreigners come to this country having different physical appearances that is why our phenotype confuses them. Sometimes people say to me that I must be a mixture of black, Indian and coloured. But most of the time people do not know into which race to classify me.

The struggle for ordinary South Africans to allocate a racial identity for individuals with ambiguous appearance also features in this account. The racialisation of Kifle as a mixture of races, therefore, seems to illustrate that when South Africans define individuals racially, they base their racial classification on particular physical markers that correspond to the racial categories in South Africa. Having physical appearance outside the socially-perceived racial boundaries, therefore, creates uncertainty, for ordinary South Africans, as to where to place the physically ambiguous individuals.
Discussion

The racialisation experiences of the study participants mentioned above were linked to a plethora of factors, such as physical appearance, the racial demographic context in which they were located, the immediate social context, language and other cultural symbols such as non-South African traditional attires. But largely, phenotype and language were the salient features in the everyday racialisation encounters of the study participants.

The racialisation experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in Cape Town as coloured was due to similar physical characteristic which the study participants shared with other coloured persons in Cape Town. Such experiences seem to be pervasive in the everyday social interactions in Cape Town. Furthermore, it has also been revealed, through the accounts of the participants, that language acted as a way of confirming whether or not a person was truly coloured. Furthermore, other external markers, such as traditional clothes worn by non-South Africans signified as markers of visibility as ‘foreign’ as opposed to being seen as a member of the coloured community.

In Durban, physical appearance was a major factor in the study participants being perceived as indian. However, other factors, such as lack of English fluency and having an accent exposed the participants’ non-indian-ness. Wearing Muslim dress coupled with having phenotype similar to indians made a study participant to be perceived as indian. Compared to the males, the female study participants reported being frequently perceived as indian in their everyday social interactions in Durban. Furthermore, the indian racial identity was associated with positive qualities.

The reason for such inconsistent racialisation patterns in Johannesburg is not clear. However, it could be due to unclear and blurred boundaries between the socially perceived indian and coloured racial identities. However, despite such inconsistency in the racialisation experiences of the study participants, some social spaces seemed to influence patterns of external racial designation. In one example, Senai, a resident of Johannesburg, related that at a certain bar, which was frequently visited by coloured people, he was initially perceived to be coloured. Even after the disclosure of his country of origin, he continued to be embraced as part of the coloured community, at the pub, due to his physical appearance. Such instances reinforce the argument that predominantly, physical appearance appears to be the most important feature of the everyday racialisation process in post-apartheid South Africa.
The everyday racialisation experiences of the study participants reinforce the literature on race in South Africa, that race-thinking in South Africa is a pervasive phenomenon in everyday life and entrenched in the perception of the South African society (Posel 2001a: 109-110; 2001b: 55). Posel (2001b: 55) described race-thinking in South Africa as a ubiquitous phenomenon as a result of the institutionalization and entrenchment of the practice of racialisation during the apartheid-era and its re-production and continuity by the post-Apartheid South African state. Corroborating this observation, Posel (2001a: 109) noted that the common sense conception of the racial identity of a person, which existed both before and during apartheid era, also seems to be in operation in the post-Apartheid social imaginary.

In order to make sense of the racialisation experiences of the study participants in their everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg, I have employed Omi and Winant’s (1994) racialisation/racial formation theory. At the micro-scale level of racialisation processes, Omi and Winant state that as socio-historically created racial identities become ‘natural’ and ‘common sense’ in the popular imagination of a race-conscious society, such identities are used to categorize individuals in everyday interactions. For example, Omi and Winant noted that in a race-conscious society, ‘one of the first things we notice about people, when we meet them, is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is’ (Omi and Winant’s (1994: 12). This ‘racial judgment’, according to (Omi and Winant (1994: 61), is practised by member of race-conscious cultures to racially categorise individuals previously unracialised. In my study, the racialisation processes occurred at the individual level between the racialising ordinary South Africans and the racialised Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers who inhabit the race-conscious South African domain. Such racialisation experiences of the study participants, when they interacted with local South Africans, were largely mediated by their physical appearance. This process is succinctly put by Omi and Winant 1994: 12) as: ‘our compass for navigating race relations depends on preconceived notions of what specific racial groups look like.’ This statement captures the everyday experiences of the participants in this study as they were perceived as either black, indian or coloured, depending on their phenotype.

The importance of physical appearance in the racialisation experiences of immigrants is supported by Vargas-Ramos’ (2014) study. The study found that Puerto Rican immigrants in the U.S. who appeared white were perceived as white; while ordinary Americans in their everyday social interactions perceived those with darker skin tone as black. Another study by Golash-Boza (2006) also found that, immigrants of Latin American origin, in the U.S. racial
context, experienced differential racialisation based on their physical appearance. Those with lighter skin tone and white phenotype experienced being perceived as white, while those with phenotype similar to black Americans were perceived as black. Corroborating my findings, a study by King-Francis (2014) also found that, within the U.S. racial context, darker-skinned immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas experienced everyday racialisation by ordinary Americans as black. Such racialisation was due to their phenotypic similarity to African Americans in the U.S. A study by Benson (2006), on the racialisation experiences of immigrants of dark-skinned African and West Indies origin, Waters (1994) on West Indies and Haitian immigrants in New York City and a study by Asante (2012) on African immigrants in the U.S. also found a relationship between phenotype and racialisation.

My findings on the interlinking of physical appearance and language also supports studies done by Saloshna Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) on youth immigrants of African origin and young immigrants who originated from the Indian sub-continent, Sri Lanka and Pakistan respectively in high school contexts. The findings of Vandeyar (2011) on the racialisation experiences of youth immigrants of African origin illustrated that the participants’ high school peers perceived them as black South Africans. However, as the immigrants lacked knowledge of the indigenous local South African languages, their foreign origin was exposed and their perceived racial identity as black South Africans undermined. Another study by Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2012) of young immigrants who originated from the Indian sub-continent also found that, the physical appearance of the youth immigrants made them to be seen as South Africans indians by their school peers; however, when they were heard speaking English, their accent automatically marked them to be perceived as non-South African indians.

The integral part of language in determining the racial identity of immigrants in a racial system is also demonstrated in empirical studies done in the U.S. context. For example a study by McDonnell and Lourenco (2009) and Bessa (2013) found that, black Brazilian immigrant women in the U.S. distance themselves from being perceived as black in the U.S. by, among other things, emphasising their Portuguese language.

There are empirical findings in international immigration literature demonstrating the link between experiences of externally imposed racial categorisation, in everyday encounters, and the racial composition of metropolitan areas in which the immigrants resided. Immigration scholars, such as Itzigsohn, Giorguli & Vazquez (2005) explored the differential racialisation experiences of Dominican immigrants in two U.S. cities, namely New York (a city with a large number of black communities) and the city of Providence (a city with a large
number of ethnically-identified communities). Their findings, interestingly, showed that the Dominican immigrants residing in New York experienced external racialisation by residents of New York as black while those who resided in the city of Providence were perceived in ethnic terms as Hispano/Hispana than black.

My finding also is supported by Awokoya’s (2012) study of Nigerian immigrants in the U.S., whereby the demographic settings in which the immigrants found themselves influenced how they were perceived by ordinary Americans. For example, when the immigrants (the majority with physical appearances similar to African Americans) were in a neighbourhood or school setting with predominantly African American presence, they were perceived as African Americans. Another study by Abdulrahim (2008) also found that immigrants in the U.S. of Arab origin, with white phenotype living in white areas, tended to be perceived and categorized as whites by ordinary white residents in those areas. An empirical study by Yabrough (2009) on immigrants in the U.S. of Central American origin also demonstrated the relationship between the local demographic context and the racialisation experiences of immigrants. It was found that, the immigrants originating from Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua who did not self-identify as Latino/Hispanic, were perceived as such by ordinary residents of Atlanta. This was due the perceived similarity of physical appearance between the Central American immigrants and the Latino/Hispanic-identified residents of Atlanta.

Similar to Yabrough’s (2009) findings, regarding the influence of the racial demographics of urban settings on how immigrants are racially perceived, Cape Town and Durban, with predominantly coloured and Indian presence respectively shaped how the participants were racially perceived. Eritreans in Cape Town, sharing similar phenotypic appearance as coloureds in the city were perceived and treated as if they were coloured by ordinary people in Cape Town. While those in Durban, with similar physical appearance to Indians, were perceived and treated as if they were Indian by ordinary people in Durban. However, the inconsistent and unpredictable ways in which the participants residing in Johannesburg were racially perceived cannot be explained by the composition of local racial demographics.

As was mentioned by Simret, a study participant from Cape Town, particular traditional attires that symbolised a cultural identity of immigrants signified the foreign origin of the person. As stated by Simret, when she wore her Habesha traditional attire, she was not perceived as coloured by the people in Cape Town despite her phenotypic similarity to the coloured community. However, at other times, when she did not wear such clothes, ordinary
people in Cape Town automatically racialised her as coloured. This finding supports a study by Kusow (2006), who found that Somali women immigrants intentionally wore their traditional Somali attire to distance themselves from being perceived as black by ordinary Americans. Racialisation processes, in everyday life, seems to be, therefore, tied to how one is racially perceived based on what one wears.

The racialisation of the study participants as Indian and coloured appears to be a unique experience reflecting the peculiar racial categories that are uniquely available in the South African racial context. For example, the racialisation experience as coloured in the South African context is unavailable in other racial contexts such as the U.S. In the U.S. racial context, due to the ideology of ‘hypo-descent’ (one-drop rule), racialising newcomers as coloured could be meaningless and absent as anyone with black ancestry is considered to be black in the U.S.

As was found by Shelly Habecker (2012), all Eritreans, despite having lighter skin colour and soft hair texture, were racialised as black in the U.S. racial landscape. In South Africa however, Eritreans with certain physical appearances were seen as Indian or coloured as such intermediate racial labels are available in South Africa. This was unlike the black/white rigid racial binary in the U.S. which inserts immigrants with non-white appearances in the catch-all black racial category. These findings demonstrate that, the experience and processes of racialisation is context specific and not a universal phenomenon. Goldberg’s (2006: 234-237) concept of ‘racial regionalism’ is important here. Goldberg developed the concept of racial regionalism to emphasize that racial identities are socio-historically created categories applicable in specific geographic (socio-cultural) contexts as opposed to universal constructs.

All six of those who reported being racialised as black were males and I have not found a female participant who recounted being perceived as black. The finding that female Eritreans did not report that they were perceived as black in everyday life should not be interpreted as if all female Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa did so. The generalisability of the results are limited as they are based on convenience sampling as opposed to generalisable random sampling technique. All the study participants who experienced such racialisation related that the reason for their external categorisation as black was due to their physical appearance which they believed corresponded to the black-identified South Africans. Furthermore, as found in those individuals who were socially perceived as Indian or coloured, language also played a role in establishing their racial identities. Those who resided in Durban said that black South Africans in Durban frequently
spoke to them in Zulu when they interacted with them. Some of those who lived in Johannesburg reported that initially people spoke to them in South African indigenous languages such as Venda, Zulu and Sotho. Those who resided in Cape Town reported being spoken to in Xhosa by black South Africans in Cape Town. The participants believed that the reason for them to be spoken to in South African indigenous languages by local black South Africans was because they were perceived as black. The black-identified participants, furthermore, reported that they were never perceived as Indian or coloured by any ordinary South African in their everyday social interactions. The black-identified refugees and asylum-seekers also recounted that their visible phenotypic features such as having kinky hair texture, darker skin tone and African-looking facial looks made them to be seen as black. Such physical markers did not allow them to be perceived as either coloured or Indian.

As Posel (2001a) argued, the only contested and ambiguous racial category in historical South Africa has been the coloured identity. As the experiences of my study participants reveal, in everyday life, therefore, perceiving a person as black appears to be more stable than, for example, a coloured identity.

The Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers that were categorised as black did not self-identify in racial terms before they entered the South African racial landscape. As Omi and Winant 1994: 14) argued, previously racially unclassified individuals and groups experience racialisation in a context where race thinking and racialisation is pervasive. When ordinary South Africans come into contact with the participants of this research, who appear to have African phenotype, they perceive and make sense of their appearance as being black South Africans.

Omi and Winant (1994: 61) described the judging of one’s race, based on external markers, as ‘...the seemingly infinite number of racial judgments and practices [people] carry out at the level of individual experience’. Race-conscious individuals judge a person’s presumed racial identity based on a number of bodily markers, such as hair texture, skin colour and other bodily characteristics as was recounted by the research participants of this study.

The encounter of the Eritrean participants with a black racial category could also be interpreted though black racial identity development theory/nigriscence theory (Cross 1995). Cross developed this model to explain the racial identity development for black individuals within the U.S. racial order. The concepts in the theory are, pre-encounter, encounter, immersion, internalisation and internalisation-commitment. During pre-encounter stage (Cross 1995: 95), a person is not exposed to racialisation experience and they are without a
racial identity. During encounter (Cross 1995: 97), the person starts to experience racialisation, such as being perceived and treated as a member of a black racial grouping. During this stage the individual develops race-consciousness and begin to develop a self-concept based on their imposed black racial identity. During immersion (Cross 1995: 98), the individual inhabits a black racial self-identification which is eventually followed by internalisation-commitment (Cross 1995: 101) stage, in which the individual completely identifies with their black racial identity and identification with other black-identified individuals.

I would argue that, this model is relevant for the black-identified study participants within the South African racial system. The individuals, who were perceived and treated as black in their everyday encounter, did not self-identify themselves or externally identified as black in their country of origin. Eritreans’ self-identification practices, in their homeland, are based on non-racial identities, such as ethno-linguistic, ethno-regional, ethno national and kinship. After entering South Africa, however, they began encountering racialisation as a result of their phenotype and arguably the encounter stage begins its process as they encounter frequent racialisation as black.

The experience of being racialised as black in South Africa, compared to those racialised as black in the U.S., seems to be different. As was illustrated by the experiences of this study’s participants, being perceived as black occurred in relation to other intermediate South African racial categories, such as indian and coloured (Posel 2001a: 107; 2001b: 56). In the U.S. racial context, being perceived as black occurred in relation to a white/black racial binary, broad enough to include even, I argue, those racialised as coloured in South Africa. As was found in Habecker’s (2012) study of Eritreans in the U.S. racial context, all Eritreans, despite their variations in phenotype, were perceived as black. This is because the rigid black/white racial binary in the U.S. does not allow newcomers in the U.S. to claim in-between identities (Habecker 2012) or to be seen as having in-between/intermediate racial identities. In South Africa, intermediate identities such as coloured and indian are available, and allow individuals, in everyday life, to be racially perceived in those intermediate racial labels.

In contrast to the South African black category, therefore, the black category in the U.S. is broad enough to incorporate immigrants with a range of phenotypic differences and assigns an imposed black identity to even those who self-identify as non-black. The US black category embraces immigrants with a multiplicity of phenotypic variation such as, inter alia, Somali immigrants (Kusow 2006; Kusow and Arjouch 2007), Ethiopian immigrants (Alemu
Puerto Rican immigrants (Duany 1998; Rodriguez, Clara and Cordero-Guzman 1992), Brazilian immigrants (McDonnell and Lourenco 2009; Bessa 2013), immigrants of Latin America origin (Golash-Boza 2006), Dominican immigrants (Itzigsohn, Giorguli & Vazquez 2006), African, and West Indies immigrants (Benson 2006).

The racialisation of Eritreans as black in South Africa could be compared with similar experiences of immigrants in other national contexts. Kaplan (1999) found that, ordinary Israelis categorised Ethiopians of diverse phenotypical features in Israel as ‘Cushim’, denoting their skin blackness. This designation was ascribed, according to Kaplan (1999), to all residents of varied physical appearances in Israel who originated predominantly from Africa and the United States (African-Americans). The black category in Israel, as in the U.S., seems to be broad enough to incorporate immigrants of diverse types of bodies. From the experience of Eritreans in this study, however, the category black seems to be a narrow category defining individuals with some defined physical attributes; hence allowing others to be seen as either Indian or coloured within the South African racial order. The socially perceived black category was also given a different meaning in other national contexts such as Italy. Arnone (2011) found that, Eritrean immigrants in Italy, despite their phenotype variations, were perceived by Italians in Milan as ‘African blacks’. In the case of my participants, however, those categorized by ordinary South Africans as black seemed to have socially perceived narrowly defined physical markers.

The co-existence of language and phenotype in the everyday racialisation process of the study participants identified as black is corroborated by Vandeyar’s (2011) study. Vandeyar found that adolescent immigrants of African origin were perceived to be black South Africans by their South African school peers. However, as the immigrants showed their lack of fluency in the South African indigenous languages, they were re-defined as non-South African foreigners rather than as black South Africans. Vandeyar’s finding is supported by the findings of this study. Those who were initially perceived to be black South Africans reported being eventually seen as non-black South Africans when local South Africans spoke to them in Zulu, Xhosa or Sotho and their lack of fluency in such languages was exposed.

The experiences of being racialised and ethnicised reflects and supports the South African literature (see Butler 1978: 47; Norval 1996: 130) in that, historically, particularly during the Apartheid era, ethnic-based segmentation of black Africans was practiced by the state and this practice has engendered both a race and an ethnic consciousness within the South African society. Meaning, as the everyday racialisation encounters of the black
identified participants show, both racialisation and ethnicisation practices mark everyday South African society.

Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers also reported being racialised as racially ambiguous by ordinary South Africans in their everyday interactions. According to the accounts of the study participants, local South Africans had difficulty locating their racial identity due to their perceived ambiguity of their physical appearance.

Unlike other Eritreans, who reported being categorised as coloured, Indian or black, the participants under this theme recounted being classified as racially ambiguous. Those who had such an experience were both males and females and all of them were located in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. They were not easily marked as one of the known South African racial categories. Ordinary South Africans believed that the study participants, who were perceived as racially ambiguous, had racially mixed ancestors; this racially mixedness did not refer to being perceived as coloureds but rather as an undetermined and unfamiliar phenotype. A combination of physical markers on their bodies did not racially make sense to South Africans. Some of the physical markers cited by the study participants were: being of very light skin, long straight hair and at the same time having African facial features. One participant reported having very dark skin colour and a long wavy hair at the same time. Yet, another respondent cited looking odd to some South Africans because of having kinky hair texture, a long nose and Indian facial features. I employ Omi and Winant’s (1994) racialisation/racial formation theory framework to make sense of the everyday racialisation experiences of my study participants who experienced racialisation as racially ambiguous in their everyday social interactions. Omi and Winant (1994:12) noted that:

The fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize someone who is [perceived to be], for example, racially “mixed” or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning. Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.

As Omi and Winant (1994: 12) have captured in the above statement, ordinary South Africans ‘…cannot conveniently racially categorize…’ those with ambiguous physical features, such as participants of this study. Eritreans in South Africa, whose physical
appearance tended to be outside the parameters of the socially understood South African racial categories, were not easily categorisable in their everyday life. Such unfamiliarity with racially confusing phenotypes, as Omi and Winant stated, produced an experience of ‘…crisis of racial meaning…’ for those who do the categorising/racialising act — in this case ordinary South Africans. The racialisation theory by Omi and Winant (1994) was developed to explain racialisation processes within the U.S. racial system characterized by black/white racial binary. However, the theoretical explanation proved to be very important in explaining the everyday racialisation experiences of the previously unracialised Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers of this study in South African racial system characterised by white, black, coloured and Indian categories.

Posel (2001a: 107; 2001b: 57) noted that, the Apartheid state defined the four racial categories: white, black, coloured and Indian, and every individual was pigeonholed into one of the racial categories and the racialisation of the South African society into the four categories continued in post-Apartheid South Africa. However, the experience of some Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in this study illustrate that people with particular physical attributes appeared to be uncategorisable in terms of the South African racial categories due to their ambiguous bodily appearances. The examples above challenge traditional understandings of racial categorisation practices in the South African society according to the four traditional categories. Empirically, this finding was absent in Vandeyar’s (2011) and Vandeyer and Vandeyer’s (2012) findings. The participants in their studies did not relate that their South African high school peers had difficulty racially classifying them.

This chapter discussed the everyday racialisation experiences of participants based on social interactions. The following chapter presents the rejection of racial categories and ethnicity-based self-identification practises of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa.
CHAPTER SEVEN
RACIAL CATEGORIES AS MEANINGLESS AND CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC SELF-IDENTIFICATIONS

Introduction
This chapter focuses on how 21 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers I interviewed have rejected self-identification in racial terms by making sense of racial classification as a meaningless practice preferring to self-identify in terms of their ethno-linguistic, national-origin and/or Habesha socio-cultural identities.

Scholarship on the extent to which non-South African communities such as refugees and asylum-seekers reject or challenge racial categories in post-Apartheid South Africa is limited. Much of the South African literature is focused on the continued significance of racial self-identification for South Africans in everyday post-Apartheid South Africa. Scholars such as Erasmus (2001), Mare (2001), Posel (2001b), Goldberg (2002), Seekings (2008), Hamnett (2010), Maré (2014) agree that racial self-identification practice continues to characterise the post-Apartheid South African society.

What is absent in such analyses is whether non-South Africans, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, for whom the race-based South African racial self-identification practices were not relevant prior to their entry into the country, adopt racial self-identification. There are two studies addressing this gap. For example, Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar’s (2012) findings of adolescent African and South Asian immigrants in South Africa suggested that such immigrants largely self-identified in terms of their countries of origin and other ethnic markers found in their countries of origin. Abdi (2015: 112) also found that Somalis in South Africa, in their everyday life emphasized their ethno-religious identity as “Muslim” as a strategic tool to link with South African Indian Muslims to benefit economically. The findings of my study build on this growing body of scholarship.

I show through the everyday self-identification practices of some of the Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers that Eritreans disrupt the continuities of racial self-identification habits in contemporary South Africa by making sense of the concept of race and racial self-identification as meaningless. They do so by constructing identity categories they brought from their country of origin. My findings illustrated that the rejection of racial classification practices and their construction of ethnic self-identification were fluid and contextually driven preferences.
In order to conceptually interpret the findings of this study, I frame the analysis within concepts borrowed from immigrant identity theory by Suárez-Orozco (2004), Berry’s (1997) acculturation strategies model and Phinney’s (1990) ethnic identity development theory. As there are a few studies on ethnic self-identification practices of immigrants in relation to their imposed racialisation experiences, I draw on the American literature to empirically situate my findings. I also discuss the findings in relation to the field of Eritrean Diaspora studies focusing on self-identification practices of Eritreans in other national contexts.

One super-ordinate theme and multiple sub-themes were identified. A major super-ordinate theme was identified under the rubric of Rejecting racial categorisation. This super-ordinate theme encompassed four subject positions, namely (1) race and racial categorisation as meaningless; (2) asserting a national origin self-identification as Eritrean; (3) asserting a Habesha self-identification; and (4) asserting a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification. The different meanings and self-identification patterns outlined in the table below, however, do not connote discrete or de-contextualised patterns but contextually-shaped and fluid formations.

Some rejected being categorised in racial terms and interpreted the concept of race as meaningless. Some self-identified as ‘human’ transcending South African racial categories. The majority of the study participants who self-identified as ‘human’ were university students who described racial categories as artificial social identities with no scientific basis. Others self-identified according to ethnicity-based self-identification with which they were familiar in their country of origin.

However, such ethnicity-based self-identification practices were at times inconsistent and shaped by multiple contextual factors such as the gender of the participant (predominantly women chose to self-identify themselves in ethnic terms), social associations, period of stay in South Africa, and neighbourhood demographic composition. The influence of the contextual factors should not be interpreted as denoting causal or statistically significant factors but were gleaned from the perspectives and accounts of the participants.

Out of the 21 participants, six study participants (three women and three men) interpreted and dismissed South African racial categories as meaningless. Five participants (one woman and four men) self-identified as Eritrean. Six participants (two women and four men) asserted a Habesha cultural identity, and four participants (all of them women) self-identified as Tigrinya.

It should be noted that the rejection of South African identity categories, Berry’s (1997) separation strategy, was not consistent. Instead some of the study participants, who
adopted a separation acculturation strategy by rejecting the host society’s identity categories, also adopted an assimilationist path in which they in some contexts took up race-based South African identities. This assimilationist path is analysed in chapter eight. Such inconsistency was informed by a number of contextual factors: some of those who rejected racial self-identification recounted that they, at times, adopted race-based racial self-identifications in certain situations.

**Race and racial categorisation as meaningless**

Six of the study participants who interpreted the idea of race and racial categorisation practices in South Africa as meaningless reported that, prior to their immigration to South Africa, the concept of race did not have any meaning for them. Even after encountering racialisation of their bodies in South Africa, they still trivialise and reject the idea of racial categorisation. Their rejection of race emanated from their prior unfamiliarity to being classified racially as well as the education they received about race at universities. Most of the asylum-seekers and refugees who were studying at universities at the time of the interviews, adopted a more global and transcendental category: ‘human’. They rationalized this preference by stressing that race is a mere social construct and a recent human invention.

Yesief is a twenty-four-year old male refugee university student in Cape Town. He previously reported his racialisation encounters on bureaucratic forms, claims a race-less self-identification as ‘human’ and describes racial categories as artificial human constructs:

To me racial identity is just an artificial identity which racist people created. I mean, I came to know about this through reading books and scientific articles about the origins of race and racial categories.
None of the black, coloured, and Indian racial categories describe my identity; I know they were invented by people. I describe my identity as a human being. Since I see myself as a human being and not as having a racial identity, I reject the idea by saying that a person’s identity cannot be expressed in terms of racial identity. Because the idea of race does not describe us; but the surprising thing is that while such is the truth, here the university students self-identify in race terms. To me, however, it doesn’t make any sense.

Yesief, despite living in South Africa for almost six years and his expected familiarisation with the concept of race and racial categories, still rejected the notion of race and racial classification of human bodies as a meaningless habit. Yesief characterises the South African racial categories as ‘arbitrary categories’ effectively relegating their ontological value as representing no objective fact but mere historical constructions and inventions. As illustrated in Yesief’s account, the self-identification as ‘human’, in relation to the idea of race and racial classification, seems to be shaped by his level of education. He is better positioned and well-informed, relative to other participants, to be aware of the social scientific understanding of race as a social construct as opposed to viewing it as an objective fact. This awareness of the racial categories as arbitrary constructions, therefore, influenced how Yesief self-identified himself as a non-racial being: as ‘human’.

Berhe, another refugee university student in Johannesburg, who encountered racial categorisation on bureaucratic forms, also expressed his rejection of being classified in racial terms in South Africa and instead emphasised a global self-identity as ‘a human being’:
Wherever I go I encounter racial categories everywhere. Even here at the university I encounter them. For example, on scholarship forms there are questions that ask “Choose one race from the races”. But to be honest, when I select a race it doesn’t mean I really want to; I self-identify myself as human rather than as someone with a racial identity. Because, you know, this idea of race doesn’t make any sense to me. The idea of race was created in the past by people to oppress others people and that it doesn’t have any scientific basis. What I believe in is that we are all human beings and that we are not races.

Berhe distanced himself from self-identifying in racial terms; instead he adopted a self-identification system based on global notions of identity, ‘human being’. Even though Berhe lived in South Africa for almost seven years, he had not yet internalised racial categories. Berhe’s example of self-identification practice in terms of a global identity as ‘human being’ shows that deeper understandings and interpretations of race as a sociological and ideological construct rather than a meaningful objective biological fact appears to be shaped by his exposure to sociological knowledge.

Saron, a twenty-eight-year old female refugee business woman in Durban, further exemplified the rejection of the idea of race and racial classification. Saron, who previously reported that she experienced racialisation as indian in her everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans in Durban, rejected the notion of race and racial classification:

When I first came to South Africa I could not make sense of this thing of classifying people saying this is coloured and that is indian. I mean the practice of dividing people and ascribing a racial identity
on the basis of their external physical appearance is nonsense. I
came to think about race for the first time when I came to South
Africa. Still up to now I am surprised; I mean, to talk about people
that someone is black or Indian is nonsense. We Eritreans describe
our self-identification in terms of which ethnic group a person is
from or from which village; that is how we describe our identity.

Saron, echoing the aforementioned study participants, characterises racial classification
based on physical appearance as ‘nonsense’ and by doing so deconstructs the taken for
granted and common sense notions of racially classifying people. Saron has lived in South
Africa for about eight years, but she still did not self-identify herself according to the South
African racial categories. In other words, she has not yet been acculturated to the everyday
habits of racial self- and other classification in South Africa. Saron specifically draws on the
cultural resources of her ethno-linguistic and regional identities, prevalent back in Eritrea
from which she originated, to justify why her self-identity is still based on the maintenance of
such identities rather than racial classifications she encountered for the first time in South
Africa. Saron’s account further reveals that even though she had developed racial awareness
in South Africa, such awareness did not translate into subsequent racial self-identification.

Akberet, a twenty-eight-year old female asylum-seeker business woman in
Johannesburg, reinforces the interpretation of race and racial categories as meaningless, in the
same vein as the above participants, specifically by comparing and contrasting notions of
self-identity practiced in Eritrea and in South Africa. Akberet previously cited that she
encountered the everyday experience of being perceived alternately as coloured and Indian at
different times and by different people. Akberet lived in a demographically heterogeneous
neighbourhood in Johannesburg with predominantly South African residents. Akberet gave
meaning to race and racialisation in South Africa as confusing and meaningless:
Ya, people in South Africa talk about race all the time. I mean I do not understand it. Maybe the reason why I still don’t get it is that because I am not yet accustomed to this way of thinking of people in racial terms. I mean, it does not make sense to me to say some one is black or coloured because of their skin colour. I mean, back home we have people who look like coloured or black, but we don’t call them “this is black” or “this is coloured”. Here in South Africa, however, they ascribe racial meanings to our physical appearance. In my country, physical appearance doesn’t have much meaning. I mean we do not ascribe racial labels to them.

Me: So until now you haven’t been accustomed to race thinking, because you have lived in this country for a long time now?

I don’t think I will ever get used to such things: I mean, it does not make sense to ascribe racial labels to people based on their phenotype. Until now I have been asking myself “Why are people in this country divided along racial lines?” I have tried very hard to get used to ideas of race as normal but even now it is meaningless. I mean, for example, I am not black and I am not even coloured, because these identities mean nothing to me.

Akberet strongly rejected and downplayed the practice of racially classifying people in South Africa as a meaningless act. She was not willing to integrate the racial categories into
her sense of self. Her rejection of a self-identification practice based on South African racial categories, therefore, was shaped by the maintenance of self-identification habits prevalent in her country of origin, Eritrea. The surprising aspect in Akberet’s experiences is that even though she has been living in South Africa for almost seven years, she still maintained that she had not yet internalised and adapted to the racial self-identification routine prevalent in South Africa.

The rejection of racial self-identification, and the description of the South African-based racial categories as ‘meaningless’, was also corroborated by Biniam. Biniam is a thirty-one-year old male refugee business man in Cape Town. Biniam, in the same interview, recounted his everyday racialisation experiences as coloured. Biniam told me that he socialised with ordinary South Africans on a daily basis. He also stated that he had plenty of South African friends and acquaintances, goes to night clubs together with them and to sporting events. Biniam said that the concept of race and the South African racial categories were meaningless and that he rejected self-identification in terms of South African based racial categories:

I do not know who came up with this idea of race in South Africa. I remember during my interaction with a coloured guy here in Cape Town; he was my neighbour. One day when he asked me what race I belonged to, I responded to him saying that the idea of race was wrong and meaningless to me. He was surprised when I rejected the idea of race because, I think, he is used to thinking about race, because he is a South African. But I told him again and again that we Eritreans do not think about race.

አነ፡ ስሇዘ ክሳብ ሕጂ ናይ ዒላት ነገር ትርጉም ኣይህበካን እዩ ማሇትዴዩ?
Me: So until now the idea of race does not make sense to you?
Yes until now it doesn’t make any sense to me. I am sure South Africans are aware that not all foreigners living in this country accept this thing of thinking about people in terms of black, white, indian. I mean, foreigners like me are having a hard time adjusting to these ideas of black, coloured, indian thing. They are useless ideas because how can you give me a name like indian or coloured just because I happen to look like indian or coloured?

Biniam, despite having intense social interactions and associations with local South Africans and his prolonged stay in South Africa — ten years — he still rejected South African racial identities. He maintained that race-based social identities in South Africa were not relevant to his self-concept. He de-familiarised the notion of race.

Kibra is a stay-at-home mother. Prior to the interview, she used to tell me how ‘ridiculous’ the practice of racial classification was whenever we raised the topic of racial classification in South Africa in our informal conversations. Kibra twenty-seven refugee in Cape Town and has lived in South Africa for two years. According to Kibra, she hardly interacted with South Africans and most of the time, her social interactions were limited to Eritreans. She rejected being racially classified in South Africa and described the idea of race as strange:
Here in South Africa people who look like me are called coloured, for example. People like Habtay [her husband] are called black because he looks like them. In this country people’s physical appearance is given a racial meaning. South Africans think in that manner. It is really strange. In Eritrea, as you know, those who look like the so-called coloured do not have any racial name. We use people’s skin colour to just describe a person. For example, to fair skinned people we describe him as “the light skinned person”, or to those who look like my husband, we refer to them as “the brown guy”, that’s all. We don’t give them labels such as black, indian or coloured like they label them here. In our country, we do not assign racial labels or meanings to people such as black, indian.

In Eritrea, skin colour and phenotype do not have any racial connotation or significance except that people use the skin colour of individuals to merely describe individuals in colour terms. Drawing on such cultural resource, therefore, Kibra distances herself from South African-based racial self-identification practices and characterises the habit of racially classifying people as an alien practice. The reason for Kibra’s description of race and racial categories as having no meaningful value to her self-identification could be due to her embedded-ness within the Eritrean community in South Africa. It is possible that such isolation from the larger South African society could have had implications for her eventual distancing of herself from South African racial categories.

Other study participants asserted their ‘Eritrean’ national identity as a strategy to reject racial self-identification practices in South Africa.

**Asserting a national origin self-identification as Eritrean**

Five of the study participants emphasised and constructed their self-identification in terms their national origin as ‘Eritrean’ in order to undermine imposed racial classification and distance themselves from race-based self-identification practices in their everyday life. This form of identifying oneself was a salient feature of a number of the research participants.
Fikre is a twenty-six-year old male refugee business man in Johannesburg. Fikre has lived in South Africa for two years. Fikre emphasised his self-identification as Eritrean and downplayed self-identification in racial terms:

I always describe myself as Eritrean ever since I left my country. I do not adopt foreign identities which are outside of my country in other countries; such as identities found in this country. I never saw myself as black or coloured. I describe myself as an Eritrean. People should not forget their roots and where they came from. Their origin is very important. So when people ask me what race I am, I tell them about my country of origin. I tell them that I Eritrean. That is what describes my identity now and forever and that I am not black or I am not Indian.

This choice of self-identification based in a country of origin is reasonable, for Fikre, given his period of stay in South Africa — two years. One might argue that after staying for a few more years in the country, he might develop awareness and possibly a sense of racial self-identification overtime. However, such possibility might not materialise as the accounts of plenty of study participants illustrated that, even with their longer stay in the country they still showed strong identifications with their ethnicity and national origin and a detachment from South African racial categories.

Elias, a male asylum-seeker business man who has lived in South Africa for four years, also emphasised his self-identification as Eritrean over racial categories which he encountered daily in South Africa. Elias, as reported earlier, experienced racialisation as coloured in his lived everyday social encounters with ordinary South Africans:
People most of the time perceive me as coloured everywhere I go I mean. But I tell them that I am only Eritrean, and even though I look coloured like them, I cannot be coloured. Some people tell me that as long as I am in South Africa I should choose one racial category. This, however, does not make sense to me because I have never perceived myself to be coloured in this country. I know where I came from and that defines who I am. I am not a South African originally and the racial categories in South African do not represent me and I do not see myself in that manner.

Me: So why is it that the racial categories in South Africa do not make sense to you?

Because as I told you I am not a South African and I believe the racial identities in South Africa belong to South Africans only. I mean the races concern only those who are originally from here but for me they don’t mean anything because my origin is not from this country. So because my origin is Eritrea I will always be Eritrean. I believe one day I will return back to my country and it is this feeling that always makes me attach myself to my country of origin.
Elias also draws upon the resource of his country of origin self-identification to distance himself from racial self-identification. This formation of a national origin self-identification practice, for Elias, appears to have developed in response to his dissatisfaction and rejection of imposed racial classification systems. Furthermore, the attachment, for Elias, to his country of origin, Eritrea, also was as a result of his imagined return to his country of origin. This imagined hope appears to reinforce his constant attachment to this country of origin and a distancing from self-identification as a member of racial categories found in South Africa. Elias has been living in South Africa for almost eight years, but despite his prolonged stay in South Africa, he still maintained a strong attachment with his country of origin and has not yet developed an attachment to the South African racial categories.

Merhawit is a twenty-nine-year old female refugee government employee. She has lived in South Africa for ten years. She also constructed an Eritrean self-identification. She experienced racial classification encounters with bureaucratic forms at work. Merhawit insisted that she self-identified in terms of her national-origin as ‘Eritrean’ and did not want to be associated with any South African racial category:

Merhawit also maintains that she sees her Eritrean national origin identity as an authentic identity and views the racial categories she encountered on bureaucratic forms as identities that did not describe her preferred true identity. What really interested me about
Merhawit’s reported continuous self-identification as Eritrean was that, despite her prolonged stay in South Africa — ten years — she resisted internalising racial self-identification practices. Although she was constantly exposed to discourses and practices of race; and racial categorisation in South Africa, she still resisted succumbing to them. Merhawit, for example, reveals that despite encountering racial categorisation on bureaucratic forms, she selected a racial category, but did not incorporate the category as part of her authentic sense of self.

I also found two participants who referred to their experiences of xenophobia as a reason to reject self-identification in terms of racial categories found in South Africa. They, instead, showed strong identification with their Eritrean national origin to emphasise pride in their roots.

An example of a study participant who emphasised self-identification in terms of an Eritrean national identity was Adam, who experienced constant racialisation as black in his everyday social interactions in Johannesburg. Adam is a twenty-six-year-old male refugee. Adam has lived in South Africa for three years. I asked Adam what it meant to be racially classified and be perceived as black in his lived experience and if he had developed consciousness of a black African racial self-identification. Adam revealed that, the experience of xenophobia in South Africa made him to reject South African-based racial identities and instead constructed an ‘Eritrean’ national identity to counter identities based in South Africa:

Even if South Africans always view me as black due to my appearance, I reject this kind of identity because after all South Africans do not like us. I don’t have anything to do with their identities here. I am proud of my own identity. I mean I have a country of origin which I call home. I am Eritrean. How can I identify as black if the blacks themselves do not like me because of
my foreign origin. If South Africans were friendly towards foreigners, I am sure I would identify as a black South African, because as you can see me I have black phenotype; but they do not like us.

An Eritrean self-identity is reconstituted in the context of the experience of xenophobia in South Africa and the rejection of a black racial identity which was associated with everyday South Africans whom he perceived as hostile. South Africans and their identities are, taken together as hostile, according to Adam’s account. It is this conflation that prompted Adam to reject a black racial category, even if he was constantly racially perceived as black by local South Africans. An ‘Eritrean’ national origin-based self-identification is constructed, therefore, to emphasise that he has a country that he calls home. By doing so, Adam is implicitly emphasising that he is proud of his country of origin despite the fact that he fled his country and is a refugee.

Bereket also self-identified as ‘Eritrean’ in response to his experience of xenophobia in South Africa. Bereket is a twenty-nine-year old male asylum-seeker business man in Johannesburg. Bereket has lived in South Africa for seven years. Bereket reported earlier that he was constantly racialised as a black South African by ordinary South Africans due to his phenotype:

I know I look very black like black South Africans and people think of me as black. But honestly speaking I do not self-identify myself as a black African because we are not liked in this country. People from this country do not like you if you are not a South African. Because of this I do not want to adopt or accept their identity. I am
sure even though I were to think of myself as a black South African, South Africans wouldn’t have embraced me. This is because if you are a foreigner these people do not like you. Therefore, I identify myself as Eritrean. I have to be proud of my country of origin because they do not welcome us here.

The above quote illustrates the effect of hostility and xenophobia on the self-identification choices of people such as refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa.

Next, I examine research participants who self-identified as Habesha, in opposition to imposed racial classification in their everyday life.

**Asserting a Habesha self-identification**

Six study participants also invoked a Habesha identity as part of their self-identification practices as a response to externally ascribed South African racial categories. The Habesha identity is largely claimed by members of ethno-linguistic groups speaking Semitic languages found in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Members of the Tigrinya ethnic group found in Eritrea and Ethiopia, Amhara and Guragie ethnic groups found in Ethiopia, claim the identity (Pankhurst 2001: 6-7; Habecker 2012: 1203). This identity is associated with ideas of cultural uniqueness and pride in one’s history and way of life (Sorenson 1993: 25; Pankhurst 2001: 11; Habecker 2012: 1203).

Alamin draws upon the Habesha identity, emphasising his uniqueness as a Habesha, in order to reject racial self-identification in South Africa. Alamin is a twenty-seven-year old male refugee business man in Durban.
I do not think of myself as Indian or coloured. People here perceive me as Indian because I look like them. But even though they view me as Indian, my self-identity doesn’t change because of how others perceive me. I know that I am Habesha, and you know that Habesha people we are a unique people. In Eritrea, we do not ascribe racial labels to people such as black or Indian. We see ourselves as Habesha and a unique people. Here in South Africa, when we meet people who look like an Eritrean or Ethiopian we ask them “Are you Habesha?” By asking them if they are Habesha, we mean “Are you Eritrean or are you Ethiopian?”

Alamin mobilizes a Habesha self-identity as a response to externally imposed racial classification practises which he perceived as threatening to his sense of self. As demonstrated by Alamin’s account, the Habesha identity was used as a counter identity to reject racial categorisations found in South Africa, such as Indian and coloured. Specifically, the notion of race associated with physical appearance, was rejected as irrelevant to his self-identity. Even if Alamin has lived in South Africa for about seven years, he still rejected internalising self-identification practices based on a South African racial category; he drew upon a socio-cultural identity of Habesha to insulate himself from being a subject of racialisation.

In the following examples, study participants claimed a Habesha self-identification as a strategy to distance themselves from negative connotations associated with being black, coloured and Indian racial identities in South Africa.

Negash had recounted earlier that he was perceived and racially classified as a black South African in his everyday encounters with ordinary South Africans. Negash is a twenty-seven-year old male refugee business man in Cape Town. In the following quote, Negash rejects his socially imposed black racial category by evoking a Habesha identity:

I do not think of myself as Indian or coloured. People here perceive me as Indian because I look like them. But even though they view me as Indian, my self-identity doesn’t change because of how others perceive me. I know that I am Habesha, and you know that Habesha people we are a unique people. In Eritrea, we do not ascribe racial labels to people such as black or Indian. We see ourselves as Habesha and a unique people. Here in South Africa, when we meet people who look like an Eritrean or Ethiopian we ask them “Are you Habesha?” By asking them if they are Habesha, we mean “Are you Eritrean or are you Ethiopian?”
Everywhere I go people think I must be black because, as you can see, me my hair and my face is like black South Africans. But I don’t like it because I don’t want to be associated with black people in South Africa. Even though I look black I don’t see myself as black because I am not a South African citizen. I have my own Habesha identity. If you are Habesha your skin colour doesn’t have much meaning. If you are Habesha, even though you are very dark or fair-skinned or have straight hair, all of us are seen as Habesha. Here in this country since I appear black people perceive but I reject such kinds of identities. You know, the problem is that in this country black South Africans are despised; especially coloured people look down on them because that what they told me. That’s why I don’t want to be associated with or to be perceived as someone who belongs to a despised people.

As illustrated by Negash, in the above quote, the Habesha identity is particularly claimed as a counter identity and strategy to distance himself from a perceived ‘inferior’ black racial category. Negash expressed outright rejection of this imposed label by drawing upon the Habesha socio-cultural identity as a way of escape from what he perceived to be an unappealing racial category. Broadly, though, the Habesha socio-cultural identity formation, for the participants was, constructed and mobilised to resist and challenge the notion of race and racialisation in the racially organized South African socio-cultural domain.

Girmay also constructed and mobilized a Habesha socio-cultural identity to distance himself from a ‘black’ racial identity. Girmay is a twenty-seven-year old male refugee student in Johannesburg. Girmay used to tell me that he was often racialised as a black South Africans due to his phenotypic similarity. He complained that he was reduced to a black racial identity which he disliked; he insisted that he was only as a ‘Habesha guy’. I asked Girmay if such an everyday experiences of being perceived as a black South African had
made him to internalize a black racial identity. Girmay responded that he distanced himself from any South African racial category by emphasising his Habesha-ness:

I think people perceive me as a black South African in this country because I appear to be a black South African. This is wrong because I don’t I do not want to have anything to do with black South Africans. Until now, I have never considered myself a South African. Even in the future, I don’t want to consider myself a South African. I think of myself as Habesha. That is what genuinely describes my identity and I have not viewed myself as black. According to me, to be seen as a black South African implies to be associated with bad things, for example with poverty or with being a criminal. In this country if you are black people suspect you and that makes me uncomfortable. As Habesha people do not perceive me as black in my country. I am seen as other people, as Habesha. I see myself as Habesha not as black because being black means to be associated with negative things.

Girmay however, claims the Habesha identity because, according to him, he associates being black with negative connotations attached to members of the black racial category, such as being perceived as poor or suspected to be a criminal. Girmay appropriated the Habesha identity, in order to shield himself from internalising and integrating the black racial
category into his sense of self, which he associated with negative stereotypes. Despite his unsubstantiated opinion about people categorised as black in South Africa, Girmay believes the stereotypes are real. To demonstrate his resistance to a black identity, he shielded himself behind the Habesha socio-cultural identity which accommodates people of a diversity of phenotypes. What is remarkable is that, even though Girmay has been living in South Africa for about six years and is subject to constant racialisation as black, he still has not adapted to a racial self-identification practice.

Others constructed and mobilized a Habesha socio-cultural identity in order to distance themselves from a coloured racial identity. Their appropriation of a Habesha identity was in response to their everyday racialisation as coloured and their association of the ‘coloured’ identity with notions of ‘mixed-ness’ and ‘impurity’.

Simret asserts a Habesha self-identification precisely in order to distance herself from a socially imposed coloured racial identity due to, according to her belief, negative stereotypes associated with being seen as a coloured person. Simret is a twenty-six-year old female refugee university student in Cape Town:

I don’t like to be seen as coloured here in Cape Town. In this city, people perceive me as coloured but I tell them that I am not coloured because I have my own Habesha identity. If you are Habesha skin colour doesn’t matter. The reason why I don’t want to be seen as coloured is that because I don’t want people to see me as though I am of mixed race. Here people think that if you are coloured you must be white and black mixed but I am not that. I am a whole person. I am not mixed and I am not an in-between race. To
be viewed as coloured has bad connotations because it indicates that you are not a whole person. But I consider myself to be a whole person and a Habesha. We Habesha are not mixed people but whole people. My mother and father are Habesha and even my ancestors are called Habesha. We have this unique identity.

In this excerpt, Simret interprets the South African coloured racial category to mean a category that connoted having a mixed biological lineage. For Simret, a Habesha socio-cultural self-identity connoted a non-racial identity category that did not contain ideas of mixed-ness. Therefore, for Simret, the Habesha identity that she re-constructed in South Africa operated as a screen to shield her from developing a sense of a coloured racial self-identity which she distanced herself from.

Asmerom also echoed Simret’s example above. Asmerom asserted a Habesha socio-cultural identity in order to distance himself from a coloured self-identification due to perceived negative stereotypes attached to being classified as a coloured person. Asmerom is a male refugee student in Cape Town. He has lived in South Africa for ten years:

I self-identify myself as Habesha. I do not view myself as coloured. Here due to my physical appearance people perceive me as coloured but I do not want to be viewed as that race. In this country, when you are labelled as coloured, they see you as a dirty race or a tainted race. That is how I interpret it. I mean you are viewed as neither black nor white, as someone in between. I mean they perceive you as though you are half from this race and half from that race. It is
not good to be labelled coloured. I consider myself Habesha because I am proud of my origin. I want to be seen as a complete person not as someone with mixed races. In Eritrea there are a lot of people who look like me but we don’t label them as coloured or give them any other name. All of them are seen as Habesha.

As a strategy to distance himself from a coloured identity, Asmerom mobilised a Habesha identity, which he believed connoted completeness as opposed to mixedness. For Asmerom, even if he shared phenotypic similarity to people identified as coloured, such similarity did not translate, for him, into self-identification as coloured.

Similarly, another study participant, Nathreth, from Durban also constructed a Habesha identity, but to distance herself from an indian racial category. Nathreth is a twenty-four-year old female asylum-seeker student in Durban. She has lived in South Africa for nine years. She had earlier recounted that she experienced everyday racialisation as indian in Durban:
Nathreth mobilised her Habesha identity to distinguish herself from an Indian category despite her phenotypic similarity to Indians in Durban. She associated being Indian with a cultural tradition that did not describe her as well as a history of slavery. Therefore, the principal justification Nathreth provided to reject an Indian racial category was due to perceived cultural and historical differences between Indians in Durban and herself as a Habesha-identified person. In self-identifying as Habesha, she elevated a Habesha identity above an Indian which she negatively viewed as an identity linked to the history of slavery.

Below, I present findings of the study participants who rejected racial classification and instead emphasised their Tigrinya ethno-linguistic identity as a strategy to distance themselves from racial self-identification.

**Asserting a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification**

Four of the study participants evoked their ethno-linguistic social identity as Tigrinya in self-identifying themselves in the context of their racialisation experiences in South Africa. The ethno-linguistic self-identification practice is reflective of the social classification system salient in Eritrea with which the study participants were familiar prior to their immigration to South Africa. As noted before, the Eritrean society is broadly divided into nine ethno-linguistic groups: Rashaida, Saho, Tigre, Tigrinya, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Kunama and Nara (See Kibreab 2000: 255; Bereketeab 2002: 138-139; Dirar 2007: 257-258). All the study participants are from the Tigrinya ethnic group.

Alemitu told me that she hardly interacts with non-Eritreans. Alemitu has earlier shared her everyday experiences of racial classification by ordinary South Africans in her social encounters. Alemitu is a twenty-one-year old female refugee student in Johannesburg. She has lived in South Africa for three years. Alemitu expressed her resistance to being racially classified and distanced herself from racial self-identification. She instead asserted her ethno-linguistic identity as a strategy to reject racial classification:
It is surprising really; to many South Africans my physical appearance is confusing. Whenever they meet me, sometimes they see me as Indian and other times as coloured. They ask me, “Are you Indian?” At other times they ask me, “Are you coloured?” But I tell them that I am none of them. In this country, I do not consider myself as having a race; I mean as long as I am in South Africa. My identity is Tigrinya and that is my real identity. Most of the time I spend my time with Eritreans in this area and most of my Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean friends live around this area. I consider myself as Tigrinya, I mean, as a member of my friends.

Despite experiencing racial classification both as coloured and Indian, on many occasions by ordinary South Africans, Alemitu rejected such externally imposed racial classification and preferred to maintain her ethno-linguistic identity as Tigrinya. Particularly, Alemitu views her Tigrinya identity as her authentic identity in comparison to the race-based imposed Indian and coloured racial categories she found in South Africa. The formation of a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification, for Alemitu, might have occurred because she frequently interacted and was socially embedded within the Eritrean community, of a predominantly Tigrinya origin, in South Africa. Her example illustrates the importance of an ethnic community within which an individual is located in the formation of identities.

Selam had good social relations with South Africans. Selam is a female asylum-seeker university student in Durban. Selam has lived in South Africa for eight years. Despite this, Selam still self-identified herself as Tigrinya and rejected being identified in racial categories. Selam has previously recounted her experiences of racialisation on university forms:

Despite experiencing racial classification both as coloured and Indian, on many occasions by ordinary South Africans, Alemitu rejected such externally imposed racial classification and preferred to maintain her ethno-linguistic identity as Tigrinya. Particularly, Alemitu views her Tigrinya identity as her authentic identity in comparison to the race-based imposed Indian and coloured racial categories she found in South Africa. The formation of a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification, for Alemitu, might have occurred because she frequently interacted and was socially embedded within the Eritrean community, of a predominantly Tigrinya origin, in South Africa. Her example illustrates the importance of an ethnic community within which an individual is located in the formation of identities.

Selam had good social relations with South Africans. Selam is a female asylum-seeker university student in Durban. Selam has lived in South Africa for eight years. Despite this, Selam still self-identified herself as Tigrinya and rejected being identified in racial categories. Selam has previously recounted her experiences of racialisation on university forms:
I always encounter people asking me about my race. Most of the time, when I meet people daily, they ask me “What is your race?” For example, whenever I meet university students. And we always talk about race. My friends on campus ask me about which race I consider myself to be but I respond to them saying I don’t have a race. I tell them I do not see myself as having a race. I tell them that my identity is Tigrinya because my ethnicity is Tigrinya. I still see myself as Tigrinya. I brought the Tigrinya identity from Eritrea and this identity has not changed until now.

Even though she had South African friends, with whom she interacted frequently and often talked about issues of race with them, she still attached herself to an identity she brought from home. Selam consciously and deliberately decided not to internalise and incorporate any South African racial category as part of her sense of self. Despite Selam’s frequent encounters with racial categories on university bureaucratic forms that asked to tick a race box, she internally rejected such imposed forms of identity categories, even if she selected a black racial category due to the compulsory nature of answering such race questions.

Shewit also constructed a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification. Shewit had earlier shared her experience of being racialised as racially ‘ambiguous’ by ordinary South Africans. Shewit is a twenty-four-year old female refugee university student in Johannesburg:

We are fed up with the people of this country asking us about our race. I mean I don’t understand why South Africans have a
tendency to assign us race based on our phenotype. In this country people think a lot about race. For example, in the Tigrinya ethnic group there are a lot of people with diverse physical appearances, but we assign racial labels or racial names to the diverse phenotypes as they do here. I self-identify as Tigrinya because my Tigrinya ethnicity accommodates every colour and every physical appearance. Everyone is identified as Tigrinya. So as long as I am Tigrinya my phenotype doesn’t need to be labelled in racial terms.

Me: So do you tell people that you self-identify as Tigrinya?

As a counter to her phenotype-based imposed racialisation, Shewit constructed her Tigrinya ethno-linguistic identity, which she perceived as an ethno-linguistic identity broad enough to accommodate individuals with a diversity of phenotypic differences. In other words, the decision for Shewit to mobilise and strongly assert her Tigrinya ethno-linguistic identity category was as a countermove to resist being ‘pigeonholed’ into a specific racial category and to de-emphasise the racialisation practice.

Liya, who maintained a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic self-identification, rejected racial self-identification because she viewed such a practice irrelevant to her self-identification practices. Liya is a female refugee in Durban. She has lived in South Africa for seven years.
Even though I was required to select one race on the hospital form, I asked myself, “What types of identities are there? Where are the identities that describe me?” Because, you know what, I consider myself Tigrinya. That is the only identity that really describes me; I am talking about my ethnic identity. When I was in Eritrea I was a member of the Tigrinya ethnic group and that was the identity that described me back in Eritrea. Even if I am far from Eritrea I am living in South Africa, I still see myself as Tigrinya. Black, indian, are not for me. Even though I selected one race on the form it doesn’t mean that I genuinely selected the category because I was compelled to do so.

Liya maintained the continuity of her ethnic self-identification in terms of Tigrinya that she brought from her homeland to South Africa. Liya also rejected self-identification in terms of South African categories because she viewed the racial identities as identities that did not represent her self-identification preferences.

**Discussion**

Those participants who made sense of South African categories as meaningless and those who rejected racialised identities and who instead asserted their Eritrean, Habesha and ethno-linguistic Tigrinya identities did so contextually driven. In other words, their self-identification choices did not happen in a vacuum. Suárez-Orozco (2004: 177) argued that the identity paths of foreign-born persons such as immigrants and refugees in their host society are not pre-determined but tend to be shaped by numerous contextual factors. As indicated in the introduction, those who rejected South African identity categories, thereby following a separation strategy (Berry 1997), also followed an assimilationist path in which they also embraced race-based South African identities. This race-based self-identification path is analysed in chapter
eight. It is in the light of such inconsistencies in self-identifications that the importance of context is discussed.

Below, I discuss the various factors through multiple theoretical lenses and in relation to empirical literature in the field.

When viewed through the lens of acculturation theory, the refugees and asylum-seekers largely adopted a separation acculturation strategy (Berry 1997: 9-10) in which they distanced themselves from identifying with racial identities found in their host society, South Africa. There were multiple contextual factors that informed and shaped the identity formation of the study participants. Cultural distance was one of the outstanding factors that shaped how the study participants self-identified. Those who rejected South African-based racial classification practices are examples of the centrality of cultural distance between the country of origin and settlement in the formation of identities. Berry (1997: 10) argued that the incompatibility of cultures between the society of origin of the immigrants and their new society of settlement creates problems with adjusting to social identities found in host societies.

Empirical studies in the immigration and racialisation literature also corroborated the findings of this study. For instance, studies by Kusow (2006) found that Somali immigrants in the U.S., who originated from a clan-based social stratification and self-identification system made sense of race-based social identities in the U.S. as alien and emphasised their ethnicities. This was especially true of immigrants who were new to their country of settlement. Other studies, which reported the rejection of racial categories by their study participants as a result of incompatibility of systems of social stratification between their countries of origin and settlement, include, *inter alia*, Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyar and Vandeyar’s (2012) studies of African and South Asian immigrants in South Africa; Habecker’s (2012) and Arnone’s (2011) studies of Eritreans in the U.S. and Italy, respectively; Kaplan’s (1999) study of Ethiopians in Israel; Chako’s (2003) and Alemu’s (2012) studies of Ethiopians in the U.S. and Asante’s (2012) work on African immigrants in the U.S.

Demographic composition of the neighbourhoods where the participants lived and frequently socialised were also some of the factors that shaped the self-identification practices of the study participants. The findings were mixed and both corroborated and disconfirmed theoretical assumptions in the immigration literature. For example, according to Berry (1997: 25), it was theorised that when immigrants live and interact in a neighbourhood dominated by members of the host society or (racially/ethnically) mixed neighbourhoods,
they tend to adopt the host country’s social identities. However, the lived experiences of the study participants did not follow this path. For instance, Akberet lived in an area with predominantly South African residents, partially mixed, but rejected South African race-based social identities. Biniam also interacted on a daily basis with ordinary South Africans in the same neighbourhood where he ran his spaza shop, but he distanced himself from identifying with South African racial categories. Biniam even characterized such identities as ‘meaningless’.

Another example is Selam. She rejected South African racial categories and still maintained her Tigrinya identity despite her frequent and intimate social interactions with her South African friends on campus. The examples above also contrast with Suárez-Orozco’s (2004: 175) argument that immigrants who frequently interact with members of the host society tend to gradually adopt self-identification practices mirroring their host society. An exception is the case of Alemitu’s case who self-identified as a Tigrinya and rejected South African-based racial self-identification practices. However, Alemitu frequently interacted with and lived in a neighbourhood inhabited by her Tigrinya ethnic community. Her embeddedness within the Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean community, therefore, possibly informed her attachment to the Tigrinya identity. This example is confirmed by immigration theorists such as Berry (1997: 25) and Suárez-Orozco’s (2004: 175) who argued that immigrants who are located and embedded within their ethnic enclaves and ethnic communities, tend to adopt self-identification practices based on their own communities.

As will be discussed below, length of stay in South Africa was also a factor for the self-identification practice of some of the study participants; but for others it was not. An example of a study participant whose identification was shaped by the time spent in South Africa is Kibra. She has only been in South Africa for two years and rejected South African-based racial categories and showed a strong attachment to social identities found in her country of origin. Another example is Fikre. He has stayed in South Africa for only two years and has self-identified in terms of his national origin as Eritrean by rejecting race-based racial self-identification practices. The self-identification strategies of the above examples were unsurprising given their relatively short period of time spent in the country. This is corroborated by Gans (1973: 42), Berry (1997: 13) and Suárez-Orozco (2004: 177) who postulated that recent immigrants, in the societies of settlement, tended to reject social identities found in their of the host societies and instead maintained social identities which they brought from their countries of origin.
However, other examples disconfirmed the above theoretical assumptions concerning the effect of period of stay on immigrants’ self-identification strategies and choices. For example, the case of Elias suggests that, even if he has been living in South Africa for almost eight years — a relatively long — he still maintained strong attachment with his country of origin as ‘Eritrean’ and rejected self-identification in terms of racial categories found in South Africa. This example seems to counter assimilation theories such as Gans’ (1973: 42) straight-line assimilation theory, which posited that immigrants who have stayed in their country of settlement for prolonged periods tend to identify with social categories found in their new homelands. Elias’ example also supports a study by Alemu (2012), who found that Ethiopian immigrants in the U.S. strongly self-identified as Ethiopians and rejected a black racial label attached to them despite their prolonged length of stay in the U.S.

Merhawit’s case of her felt self-identification as ‘Eritrean’, even though she selected black as her superficial and strategic identity, corroborates and supports a study by Rodríguez (2000). In Rodríguez’s (2000) study, immigrants of Latin American origin internally rejected self-identification in terms of the limited number of racial categories they encountered on U.S. census forms, even though they selected one category. Their decision to select a U.S.-based racial category was shaped by the constraining and limited number of available categories on the forms. The participants in Rodríguez’ (2000) study did not authentically identify themselves in such terms.

The other element that, arguably, shaped and influenced the self-identification patterns of the study participants was hostilities and xenophobia they experienced. For example, as was illustrated in Adam’s account, he chose to distance himself from South African racial identity categories and maintained his national-origin based identity as ‘Eritrean’, due to his personal experiences of xenophobia in South Africa. Berry (1997: 11-12) described this as a separation acculturation strategy, in which immigrants choose to identify with the cultures and identities of their country of origin to distance themselves from cultural practices and social identities found in the hostile host society. Portes and Zhou (1993: 81-82) and Suarez-Orozco (2004: 180) also noted that the nature of reception by members of the host society shapes how immigrants self-identify. Therefore, the experiences of the study participants who distanced themselves from South African-based racial categories due their experiences of xenophobia largely confirm the theories mentioned. The theories generally argue that, when immigrants experience hostility in their country of settlement, such as racism and xenophobia, they tend to reject social identities of the host society and instead tend to evoke national-origin’s ethnicity-based self-identifications systems.
Participants who self-identified as Habesha (Pankhurst 2001: 6; Habecker 2012) as opposed to self-identifying in South African racial categories appeared to have been influenced by multiple factors. The most salient factor that informed the self-identification patterns as Habesha, by the participants, was their rejection and dissociation from socially imposed black, coloured and Indian racial identities. The participants associated such racial identities with negative images. Being perceived as black was associated with inferiority, criminality and poverty. Being perceived as coloured was given meaning as connoting impurity, incompleteness and in-between-ness. Being seen as Indian was associated with images of past slavery (i.e., as low status origins) and an alien culture. The participants therefore adopted a Habesha self-identification to emphasise their uniqueness, in terms of culture and history (Pankhurst 2001: 6; Habecker 2012). They opposed being classified in terms of South African racial categories, which they saw as irrelevant to their self-identification preferences.

Studies of Eritreans living in the U.S. by Habecker (2012) and Eritrean youth living in Italy (Arnone 2011) also found that Eritreans mobilised and constructed their Habesha identity as a strategy to distance themselves from their imposed black racial category, a category they associated with negative stereotypes. However, in this study, my participants did not only claim the Habesha identity as a device to dissociate themselves from a supposed inferior racial category in South Africa, but also as a way to reject the notion of race and the practice of racial categorisation more generally.

As was illustrated in the narratives of some of the Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in this study, they self-identified as Habesha to differentiate themselves from South African-based racial categories, namely coloured and black. Such findings corroborate Habecker’s (2012) findings that, Eritreans in the U.S. asserted a Habesha self-identification to disassociate themselves from a black category. However, such ethnicity-based self-identification preference as Habesha was not stable or constant. Instead, as was revealed in my findings, the Habesha self-identification did not occur as a singular, stable and independent self-identification path, but coexisted and overlapped with other racial self-identification preferences. The findings by Habecker (2012) have shown that the Habesha self-identification of the Eritreans in her study was a constant and fixed identity. However, this study’s findings have shown that such singularity of self-identification was complicated by the adoption of race-based social categories.

Predominantly, the sub-themes discussed above point to the fact that the study participants, who claimed the different versions of ethnicity-based self-identifications,
emphasised their ethnicity over race-based self-identifications which they encounter in their everyday life in South Africa. This pattern of ethnicity-based self-identifications could be seen, partially, through the lens of Phinney (1990) ethnic identity development theory. As Phinney (1990: 505) argued, before an encounter with a racially organized society, an immigrant’s ethnic/cultural identity stays dormant. Phinney (1990: 505) argues that ethnic self-identification, such as national origin, for immigrants, tends to be unimportant in their country of origin. Phinney’s (1990: 505-507) termed this stage as an unexamined or diffused stage of ethnic identity in which some forms of ethnic identities remained hibernated until contact with a foreign culture. This stage seems to describe the self-identification of the participants as ‘Eritrean’. The nationality-based Eritrean identity was not salient in the participants’ country of origin but came to be more significant for their self-concept because of their migration experiences and contact with a racially organised socio-cultural society. Phinney (1990: 506) calls this contact and awareness of one’s ethnicity the moratorium or exploration stage of ethnic identity development.

An example of the ethnic identity formation is Fikre. He noted that he distanced himself from self-identifying in racial categories found in South Africa and constructed a national origin-based Eritrean ethnic identity. Fikre’s national-origin based ethnic awareness is reflected in his statement, ‘I have always self-identified myself as Eritrean ever since I left my country’. This awareness and attachment to the country of origin, as exemplified by Fikre’s account, as a result of his migration experience, is a reflection of a stage of ethnicity navigation. The statement, by Fikre, ‘I am Eritrean, and that describes me now and forever’ appears to echo Phinney’s (1990: 507) concept of achieved ethnic identity in which an immigrant exhibits strong attachment with their ethnicity-based identities.

Generally, the strategic and situational aspect of the rejection of self-identification in racialised South African categories and the mobilisation of ethnicity-based self-identification positions exemplified by my study participants support Abdi’s (2015: 112) findings. Respondents in Abdi’s study in South Africa, in their everyday life, rejected self-identification as black; instead they constructed and ethno-religious identity as “Muslim” as a conscious strategy to forge a common religious identity with successful South African Indian Muslims in order to benefit economically.

In relation to the literature on ethnicity and ethnic identity, the findings supported the instrumentalist argument of ethnic identity theories (see Nagel 1994: 154; Gorenburg 1999: 577; Brubaker 2002: 164), as opposed to the primordial arguments for ethnic identity (see Gil-White 1999: 799-722; Van Evera 2001: 20). The study participants consciously
constructed their ethnic-identities, which they brought from their country of origin, Eritrea, for instrumental reasons — in order to distance themselves from racial self-identification. In other words, their ethnicity-based self-identifications were shaped by contextual circumstances as opposed to a deeply-felt eternal sense of belonging and attachment to their ethnic identities as the primordial assumptions of ethnicity would argue.

For some of the study participants, who dissociated from South African-based identity categories, a number of determinants appeared to have shaped how they responded to racialisation encounters and the subsequent identification practices they adopted. For example, those who rejected South African-based racial categories as meaningless and viewed them as irrelevant for their self-identifications, seemed to be influenced by various factors, such as level of education, the length of time spent in the country of settlement, and ethnic/racial demographic composition of the neighbourhood they inhabited. Some study participants, despite their prolonged stay in the country, did not adapt to the South African racial categories. Others regarded their rejection of South African racial categories as reasonable because they had only lived in South Africa for a little while.

This chapter analysed and discussed the self-identification practices of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers who chose to reject racial self-identification as meaningless, and who self-identified in terms of ethnicity found in their country of origin, Eritrea. In the following Chapter, I present findings of the study participants who adopted black and coloured racial identities.
CHAPTER EIGHT
ADOPTING BLACK AND COLOURED SELF-IDENTIFICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses 21 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers who self-identified in racial terms as black and six participants who adopted a coloured racial identity.

Scholarship on racial self-identification practices in post-Apartheid South Africa, in relation to racial categories, has largely focused on the continued entrenchment and salience of racial self-identification practices as they relate to South Africans. For example, Posel (2001b: 51) observed that, in post-Apartheid South Africa, racial self-identification has become ‘…a habit of thought and experience, a facet of popular 'common sense' still widely in evidence’. Seekings (2008: 5-6) also noted that in contemporary South Africa, South Africans continue to self-identify in racial terms. Hammett (2010: 247) argues that, ‘the racial markers of self and other continue to constitute identities’ in everyday post-Apartheid South African society. Maré (2014: 33), in his recent book, notes that the practice of racial self-identification continues to characterise South Africans, in their everyday social interactions.

What is ignored in the South African scholarship on race is the extent to which non-native communities such as immigrants/refugees/asylum-seekers adopt and self-identify in terms of South African racial categories in contemporary South Africa. This chapter addresses this gap in the literature. An exception is a recent study by Abdi (2015) in which she argues that even though, under normal circumstances, Somalis in South Africa, do not choose to share a black self-identification with black South Africans, during xenophobic violence targeting African immigrants, Somalis in South Africa mobilize and construct a black/African identity to emphasise a ‘black on black’ attack narrative.

Through the analysis of the everyday racial self-identification practices of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers, I show how some non-South African communities are assimilating into South African racial categories by adopting racial categories, such as black and coloured. None of the participants adopted a white racial identity. The racial self-identification practices for such communities are not only informed by their physical appearance but by other social factors. The social factors include: the racial/ethnic
composition of the neighbourhoods in which they live, the racial/ethnic composition of their friends, and the racial identity of their South African spouse. For some of the participants, their physical appearance did not inform how they racially self-identified. For some, the coloured racial identity was associated with having positive qualities, rather than being associated with notions of mixedness and impurity as is presented in most South African racial identity studies. The racial self-identification practices of the participants were not consistent, but reasonably malleable and fluid so that, at times, for some, it existed alongside their ethnicity-based self-identification practices. For example, those who self-identified as Eritrean, Habesha and Tigrinya also self-identified as black when it was expedient to do so. None of those who asserted their Eritrean identities rejected self-identification in terms of racialised South African categories. Such patterns of racial self-identification illustrate that non-South African refugee and asylum-seeker communities are redefining and recasting traditional forms of racial self-identification habits and norms in contemporary South Africa by hybridising self-identification practises.

I draw on conceptual and theoretical concepts to interpret the racial self-identification practices of the participants such as: Cross’ (1995) black racial identity development model, Suárez-Orozco’s (2004) immigrant identity theory, and Berry’s (1997) acculturation strategies model. I also discuss the findings in relation to literature on racial identity formation of immigrants in the U.S., and the racial self-identification practices of Eritreans in other national contexts.

Two super-ordinate themes and multiple sub-themes were identified. The super-ordinate and sub-themes are outlined in the table below. The different meanings and self-identification patterns outlined in the table below, however, do not connote discrete/de-contextualised patterns but are contextually-shaped and fluid racial identity formations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Self-identified as black</td>
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**Active identification with being black:**
- Forsaking old identities and appropriating a new black racial identity
- Identifying with black oppression and the adoption of a black racial identity

**Fitting in:**
- If I am perceived as black, then I am
Self-Identified as Black

Twenty-one of the study participants self-identified in terms of the South African black racial category. Such self-identification, however, was, in the majority of cases, claimed by study participants who also asserted ethnicity-based self-identifications. This pattern of fluid self-identifications was noted by Suárez-Orozco (2004: 177) when she argued that self-identifications for immigrants, or in the case of this study, refugees and asylum-seekers, were contingent upon a plethora of contextual circumstances. The different sub-themes enumerated above reflect the diversity of contextual factors that influenced the self-identification practiced of the study participants as black. The sub-themes under the main theme of self-identification as black are grouped into three strategies of adopting blackness, namely (1) active identification with being black; (2) fitting in; and (3) instrumentality.

I now present an ideographic account of the sub-themes followed by my hermeneutic stance, which I adopted to interpret what those experiences mean.

Active Identification with Being Black

Under this sub-theme, participants actively appropriated a black racial identity by consciously and deliberately distancing themselves from Eritrean identities, and identifying with the black experience of racism and marginalisation.
Forsaking old identities and appropriating a new black racial identity

Two of my study participants (a woman and a man) deliberately and willingly adopted a South African black racial category and viewed such self-identification as a new identity, which they embraced as part of their new identity. Such study participants distanced themselves from self-identifying in terms of ethnic identifications that they brought from home. They resented their country of origin and social identities associated with their national origin due to their persecution experiences in their country of origin, Eritrea and their forced migration.

Yoftahe informed me that he had acquired a new black South African identity as he had erased all identities he self-identified with back in Eritrea. Yoftahe is a twenty-four-year-old male refugee university student in Cape Town. He has lived in South Africa for six years. Yoftahe stated that his experience of persecution in Eritrea and his involuntary emigration from his country made him reject all self-identifications associated with his country of origin. He instead adopted a new South African-based black identity as a way of erasing his Eritrea-based past identities:

Honestly speaking, I don’t want to have anything to do with identifying with my country of origin or my ethnicity because my country has rejected me. My country had persecuted me; therefore, I have decided to adopt a new identity. I mean, South Africa has accepted me now and is my new home. Therefore, so long as it is my new home, I have decided to adopt a new black South African identity in my new home.
As you can see me, I appear blacker than the so-called coloured people. I look very much like black South Africans and that is why I self-identify as black. As I told you, South Africa to me is like my country. Our country has rejected us but South Africa has received us with open arms and gave us protection. Therefore, why not adopt South African-based identities because my intention is to settle in this country rather than to go back to Eritrea. That is why I adopted this country’s black racial identity because my plan is to assimilate with the people of this country.

Yoftahe in the above excerpt deliberately distanced himself from self-identifying in terms of national origin-based ethnicities. This was due to his persecution experiences in his country of origin and the consequent resentful feelings he felt about his country of origin. His self-identification as a black South African, therefore, was informed and shaped by his past experiences as a persecuted Eritrean. Such experience informed his decision to assimilate into a South African social identity, which he viewed as his new identity. In addition to his self-identification as a black South African, he distanced himself from identity categories found in Eritrea, by adopting a new identity, Yoftahe’s self-identification was also facilitated by the perception that ordinary South Africans have about his racial identity as black.

Selamawit also echoed the self-identification experiences as black South African by renouncing self-identifications she brought from her country of origin. Selamawit is a twenty-three-year old female refugee business woman in Johannesburg. She always talked as if she was a South African and referred to herself as a black person:
Selamawit justified her self-identification as a black South African in South Africa by claiming that she had no hope of returning back to Eritrea. She considered South Africa as her permanent home; hence her choice to adopt an identity category relevant in South Africa. Her sense of belonging to any form of identity found in Eritrea was deliberately forsaken as she developed a new sense of self as a black South African.
Identifying with black oppression and the adoption of a black racial identity

Two participants (a woman and a man), both studying at university, strongly self-identified in terms of a black racial category citing their identification with black people’s historical experience of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. They further explained that education had helped them to be aware of the historical subjugation of black Africans by white Western powers, hence their identification with blacks.

Weyini adopted and incorporated into her sense of self a black South African racial identity by identifying herself with blacks citing that they were victims of slavery and colonialism. Weyni is a twenty-eight-year old female refugee university student and lives in Johannesburg:

Always people perceive me as Indian because in my physical appearance I look Indian. Based on my physical you might think I must be Indian. However, even though I look Indian, I consider myself black. I mean taking into account the history of black Africans I self-identify myself as a black African. The history of Africans means my history too.
You know, as you know historically black Africans have been the victims of slavery and colonialism by Western whites. Colonial powers in the past characterised all people in Africa as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘savage’. My grandparents included also. I learned about this from history books and reading academic articles. Such sources have opened my eyes to an understanding that Africans, and myself included as an African, have been victims of a race-based oppression by whites. It is for this reasons I self-identify as a black African.

Weyni’s self-identification as black was not shaped by the influence of socially imposed external categorisation as indian (she experienced racialisation as indian) but as a result of her identification with the experiences of historical oppression of black South Africans. As was illustrated in her account, her choice to self-identify as a black South African was informed by her reading books and class courses at the university where she attends. Her phenotype did not shape how she racially self-identified.

Gebray also adopted a black South African self-identification by citing the history of apartheid and his identification with South African people who were categorized as black during apartheid era. Gebray is thirty-one and a male refugee university student in Cape Town. He related that South African blacks were the victims of Apartheid’s oppressive racial policies and practices.

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I identify with black South Africans as long as I am here in South Africa. I mean, if I were to live during the era of Apartheid, the Apartheid government would have viewed me and victimize me as black because in my physical appearance I look black. I mean, I know that the idea of race is meaningless. The idea of race was invented by man and is a fiction. However, despite this race has a meaning and a reality in everyday life because people discriminate you based on phenotype. During Apartheid black people who looked like me had been victimised. I consider myself black because blacks were victimised during Apartheid and I look like them. I mean I imagine myself in Apartheid and think that if I had been there I would have been a victim of race oppression like black South Africans. This is because those with darker phenotype like me were oppressed in history. Therefore, I adopt the history and identity of blacks.

Unlike Weyni, who reported that she was perceived as indian, Gebray was racialised as black in everyday life. For Gebray, this perceived phenotypic similarity strengthened his identification with the black racial category in addition to his awareness of the history of race-based oppression of black South Africans.

**Fitting-In**
Those who self-identified as black also did so in order to fit in with the South African black racial identity, as a result of their consciousness of their physical appearance, or in reference to the racial composition of the neighbourhoods in which they lived or because of the racial identity of their South African friends.

**If I am perceived as black, then I am black**
Five of the study participants (all of them men) related that they developed and internalised a black African racial consciousness as a result of being constantly racialised as black.

Adam recounted that ordinary South Africans perceive him as black in his everyday social interactions and yet he had asserted a national origin-based self-identification as ‘Eritrean’. Adam is a male refugee living in Johannesburg. Adam had also said that he preferred self-identifying as Eritrean due to the xenophobic attitude by South Africans which
he sees as a reason to distance himself from South African racial identities. However, in the same interview, Adam suddenly shifted his orientation and related that, as a result of the experience of constantly being identified by ordinary South Africans, he has started to see himself as black:

As I have told you people always view me as black wherever I go. I cannot escape from such encounters as long as I am in South Africa. People look at my appearance and they conclude that I must be a black South African. This experience has changed my identity and how I see myself in this country. I know that I have my own identity which I brought from Eritrea but as long as I am here in South Africa I began to see myself as black. This is because everywhere I go people perceive me as black. Well, if people perceive you as black sometimes you think of yourself as black.

Despite his self-identification as black, Adam had previously distanced himself from any South African racial categories and had self-identified himself as an ‘Eritrean’. Even if he resisted adopting a black racial identity, ironically he adopted the very identity he distanced himself from as a result of repeated racialisation of his physical appearance as black. Adam, therefore, inhabits two identity formations in his identification practice: that of an ethnicity-based Eritrean self-identity and a South African based black African racial self-identification.

Negash, a male refugee business man in Cape Town, also adopted a black racial category. Negash has previously self-identified as Habesha because he associated a black racial identity with inferiority. However, although he expressed self-identification as Habesha
to distance himself from blackness, in the same interview, he altered this path of self-identification and disclosed that he also adopted a black racial identity due to everyday imposed continuous racialisation by ordinary South Africans:

Even though the black racial identity was associated with notions of inferiority, an everyday imposed racialisation as black framed a subsequent black self-identification for Negash. Even though, previously, Negash had mobilised and constructed a Habesha socio-cultural identity to counter internalising a black identity, this was a short lived rather than consistent self-identity.

Haile, a twenty-six-year old male refugee business man in Durban, also echoed the self-identification practices of the above two examples by citing that his self-identification as black was informed by an externally ascribed black racial category which he experienced in his everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans:
At first people started telling me that I looked black, but I didn’t take it seriously. I mean, I didn’t think I looked black as other black South Africans. But over time when this encounter became a routine for years then later it altered how I viewed my identity. I mean, I started questioning my previous self-identities. I started to view myself as black because that is how people started perceiving me. When people interact with me they do so thinking that I must be a black South African and this started modifying my self-concept.

This experience of routine external classification moulded a black racial identity consciousness in the participant and developed and internalised a black racial identity — ironically a racial identity category he was embarrassed to identify with.

Zerihun, a twenty-seven-year old male refugee trader in Durban, who earlier shared his racialisation experiences as black, also said that after entering South Africa, he constantly has been perceived as a black South African and as a result he has become self-conscious of his physical appearance and eventually has developed a black self-identification:

In our country, back in Eritrea I never saw myself as black because we do not describe our identity in racial terms as white or as black. But here in South Africa, I mean when I came to this country I developed this consciousness of being black because people started
thinking of me as me as black in this country. This is because if you look like them, they view you as black. Then when I started to be aware of my phenotype I started saying “They are right that they perceive me as black because I definitely look like them.” In this country I am black because my physical appearance is similar to theirs.

The development of a black self-consciousness was mediated by learning to ascribe racial significance to his appearance, and the internalisation of an externally ascribed black racial identity in everyday social interactions.

Self-identification as black was also, further, adopted by Asmerom. Asmerom’s black self-identification was shaped by the white gaze\(^{12}\) in South Africa. Asmerom is a participant who described his racialisation experiences as coloured in Cape Town and self-identified as Habesha by rejecting the coloured racial category. Asmerom is a male refugee university student in Cape Town. He has lived in South Africa for ten years. However, despite his self-identification in terms of ethnicity, he also said that he felt black when interacting with white South Africans in Cape Town:

\(^{12}\) A ‘white gaze’ is here understood as how a non-white person is perceived to be seen (racially) by a white person.
at a restaurant. We were talking about music and songs. Then I told him that I liked Mozart’s music. Then the white guy told me that he was not aware that blacks had a passion for Mozart’s music. I was surprised and said to myself, “So this guy thinks I am black?” It was for the second time that a white person suggested that I was black. It altered how I self-identified myself; especially whenever I am in the company of white people I consider myself black.

Asmerom’s example seems to be interesting in that, even if he was frequently racialised and perceived to be coloured in Cape Town, however, under ‘the white gaze’, he was perceived to be black. Because of this experience, his sense of self as a black person was heightened and developed when he found himself interacting with white people. The experience of feeling black when around white people was crystallised because of interpersonal conversations Asmerom had with persons he identified as white.

**Feeling black when living in black neighbourhoods**

Three study participants (all of them men) also self-identified as black. But their self-identification as black was influenced by the neighbourhood context in which they found themselves and their everyday social interactions with people living in those areas. Their self-concept as black was shaped by the everyday social interactions they had with black South Africans and other nationalities of African origin in the neighbourhoods predominantly inhabited by such groups.

Kinfe lived in Durban in a neighbourhood predominantly populated by black South Africans and other Africans and his everyday social interaction was largely with the people in the neighbourhood. Kinfe is a twenty-seven-year old male refugee business man. He has lived in South Africa for four years:
I have lived in this neighbourhood for a long time and as you can see it is predominantly populated by black people. Most of the time, my interactions have been with blacks here and not with other races. As I told you, this area is full of black people. Black South Africans and others from African countries live here. I have been living among them. My social life is with blacks. I eat their food, I go to their night clubs and I eat at their restaurants. So since I live among blacks I adopted their identity. I see myself as black. There are no whites around here. Even indians are not here. This place is full of blacks.

As Kinfe’s example demonstrates, one’s social location and embedded-ness in a neighbourhood populated by a particular ethnic/racial group tends to shape one’s sense of identity. According to Kinfe, his sense of a black racial self-identity did not emanate from his physical appearance or even imposed racial classification. It was due to a sense of belonging he developed to blackness as a result of his constant and intimate social interactions and the sharing of cultural elements with people in such neighbourhoods.

Yohannes has earlier shared his experiences of being alternately racialised as indian and coloured in his everyday social encounters with ordinary South Africans. Yohannes lives in an area populated largely by black African immigrants and black South Africans in Johannesburg. Yohannes is twenty-eight and is a male refugee businessman and has lived in South Africa for five years. He states that, due to his frequent interaction with the residents in his area and his location in the demographically black neighbourhood, he felt more black than any other identity category in South Africa:

I see myself as black because since I arrived in this country my contact has been with blacks. Since my arrival in South Africa I have been living in a neighbourhood with predominantly black South Africans and blacks from other countries.
I have always shared flats with black South Africans and other Africans in this area. I spend most of my life with them. I even date black women in this area. Therefore, all my life is with them. Even though people see me as Indian and other times as coloured, but what attachments do I have with them? I have never lived amongst them or had much interaction with them; therefore, I have never considered myself coloured or Indian. Since I arrived in this country my interactions have been with blacks and that is why I self-identify as black.

Despite his physical appearance, which was frequently perceived as either coloured or Indian, Yohannes moves beyond self-identifying in terms of racial identities socially imposed on him: coloured and Indian. He, instead, self-identified as black. His self-identification, in terms of a black racial identity, was shaped and influenced by the very neighbourhood he lived in and his everyday intimate social interactions with black South Africans and other black African immigrants in the area. Therefore, the formation of a black racial self-identification for Yohannes appeared to be the immediate social world within which he was embedded rather than his physical appearance.

Alamin, a refugee business man in Durban, also self-identified as black despite his racialisation experiences in his everyday life as Indian. Alamin lives in an area in Durban with predominantly black South African and other African residents. He stated that he has
lived in the neighbourhood for a long time, and his everyday social interactions were largely with black African immigrants and black South Africans:

I consider myself black because I have been living amongst blacks for a long time. I socialise a lot with black people, that is why I think of myself as black. There are many Eritreans living in this neighbourhood and they might as well self-identify as black. Outside this neighbourhood when I am walking in the city, people think I must be indian, as I told you earlier. You can even see for yourself. Due to my phenotype people view me as indian. I think they perceive me as indian because I look like one as you can see it for yourself. Even though on the outside I look indian, deep in my heart I consider myself black. This is because the people that I spend time with are blacks and I have nothing to do with indians.

Even though Alamin was racialised as indian in Durban, he rarely interacted or had any indian friends in the city. He, as a result, developed no attachment to nor had he internalised the indian racial identity into his sense of self. The above example, as the other study participants, illustrates and reveals that, for foreign-born non-South African communities, everyday social contacts and relations appear to be a very important factor for the development of a particular racial identity in the South African racial order.

Having black friends makes me feel black

There were three study participants (one woman and two men) who adopted a black racial self-identification practice influenced by their black South African friends. Such study participants disclosed that they developed a sense of self-identification as black due to the
attachments to and intimate social interactions they had with those they identified as black South Africans.

Simret is one of the study participants who self-identified as black because of her black South African friends. Simret is a refugee university student in Cape Town. Previously, she had described her everyday racialisation experience as being perceived as coloured by ordinary South African in Cape Town. She also had said that she self-identified in terms of her socio-cultural identity as ‘Habesha’ to resist a coloured identity which she viewed as connoting impurity and mixedness:

I consider myself black because I have many black South African friends. We are like family because we are very close. I feel like I am black like them. I socialise with them as a black African not as Habesha. Since I am close to my black South African friends I consider myself black. We are very close as friends. Since we are very close, I consider myself black like them.

What is surprising about Simret’s account is that whenever Simret is in the presence of her black South African friends, she felt she belonged to a black racial identity rather than her previously strongly asserted Habesha identity. Simret had earlier said that she experienced racial classification as coloured due to her physical appearance. She distanced herself from this socially imposed racial classification, notwithstanding, and adopted a black racial identity. The above excerpt also illustrates that the self-identification strategies of the refugees and asylum-seekers tend not to be informed by their racial phenotype. It also shows that their self-identification practices are dynamic and contextually shaped as opposed to fixed and rigid. Simret self-identified as Habesha, but this ethnicity-based self-identification is not the only identity. At the same time, Simret also self-identified in terms of the South African black racial identity.
In a related experience, Kifle also said that he felt black due to his friendship association with ‘black’ South Africans. Kifle is a twenty-six-year old male asylum-seeker businessman in Cape Town:

I began to see myself as black when I started having black South African friends. People always cannot figure out which race I am. However, even though my phenotype is ambiguous I see myself as black. I do not self-identify as any other race. It is my black South African friends that made me think that way. We are always together. We drink together, we spend time together, we are very close to each other; that is why I said I consider myself black.

Despite having an ambiguous phenotype, as was perceived by ordinary black South Africans, Kifle elected to self-identify as black. Therefore, the formation of a black racial self-identification, for Kifle, was mediated by how socially close he was with black South Africans.

Elias, who experienced racialisation as coloured, also recounted that he self-identified as black because most of his friends are black and this friendship has shaped how he self-identified as a black person. Elias is a male asylum-seeker businessman in Cape Town. He has lived in South Africa for four years:
Since I have so many black South African friends I feel black. I mean, since we are very close and spend a lot of time together I consider myself black like them. Most of the time, we are together. They visit where I stay and we make braai at my place on weekends. I also visit them and I know their families. Since I am very close to my black South African friends I feel black.

Even though Elias was frequently racially classified as a coloured South African in everyday life by ordinary South Africans, he did not develop attachment to this socially imposed racial identity. Elias saw beyond his physical appearance and adopted a black racial identity even though he was not perceived as such by people in Cape Town. Previously, Elias had said that he strongly and ‘authentically’ self-identified as ‘Eritrean’ to counter racial self-identification as coloured. Despite this assertion, however, in the same interview, he contradicted his account by also self-identifying in terms of a South African racial category: as black.

**Instrumentality**

Participants also adopted a black racial identity for a strategic reason to benefit from affirmative action. Others attempted to pass for a black South African in order to appear invisible in everyday life. In this theme, the research participants attempted to create an impression that they were black South Africans in order to escape hostilities from ordinary South Africans, such as xenophobic attacks.

**A strategic adoption of a black racial identity**

Three study participants (all of them women) self-identified as black South Africans for strategic reasons. Predominantly, this strategic way of racial self-identification as black took place in the context of bureaucratic forms. The interesting aspect is that even those who said they appeared more Indian and coloured preferred to self-identify as black in order to benefit from identifying with the black racial category. Some, who claimed a Tigrinya self-identity as their only identity, also preferred a black racial category on bureaucratic forms to take advantage of opportunities that come with self-identifying as black.

Selam who earlier said she self-identified in terms of a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic identity ticked a black racial category on university admission forms, in order to take
advantage of admission opportunities at higher institutions in South Africa. Selam is a female asylum seeker university student in Durban:

On university admission forms I select black; even on other forms I select black. I mean I select black on the forms in order to gain advantage. However, just because I select black on different forms doesn’t mean that in my heart I truly consider myself black. No, black is not my true identity. I truly self-identify as Tigrinya. However, when completing forms I select black rather than coloured or Indian.

Me: So is it because you look black that you select black?

No, as you can see me my physical appearance is similar to Indian South Africans. If I were to go by the looks, I would automatically select an Indian racial category on the different forms. However, selecting an Indian category is not beneficial. I mean, to select black on forms has many advantages.

Even if Selam was perceived as Indian by South Africans, she did not select the Indian racial category on the forms. Selam checked the black racial category as she believed that selecting a black racial category could benefit her. This strategic selection of a South African black racial category on bureaucratic forms reveals how Selam deliberately selected a black racial category even though she did not believe the category reflected her ‘true’ self-identity.
Selam in the excerpt inhabits two self-identification practices, namely an ethnicity-based Tigrinya self-identification which, she claims, described her true self-identity and a superficial and momentary black racial self-identification, which she selected in order to take advantage of opportunities that the black racial category offers.

Corroborating Selam’s account, Lemlem also superficially self-identified as a black South African on forms in order to take advantage of opportunities attached to a black racial category. Lemlem is a twenty-seven-year old female refugee university student in Cape Town:

Whenever I complete scholarship or bursary forms I always select black because selecting black has many advantages rather than, for example, selecting white or indian. Therefore, whenever I get a chance to complete a form, I do not hesitate as to what to select. I immediately select a black category. You have to be clever enough to select a black identity on such forms.

Me: So you don’t select other races on forms?

If you select other races then the probability of winning a bursary is slim, you know. You might not get scholarship opportunities because you didn’t select black on such forms. However, outside
the context of forms I do not describe myself as black. This is because I am not a South African hence the race is not relevant to me. I mean, it does not reflect my true identity. However, as I told you just select black for the money; outside such context I do not self-identify as black.

Even if Lemlem selects a black racial category on the university bursary forms she did not truly identify with the identity category; it was a rational/strategic act. According to Lemlem, she only self-identifies as black whenever she encountered forms, but beyond that context, she distanced herself from self-identifying as black. This example illustrates the instrumental use of racial categories as opposed to a true racial self-identification practise.

Merhawit, a female government employee, also strategically self-identified as black whenever she filled out bureaucratic forms at work in order to benefit from promotion opportunities. Merhawit had in another place of the interview self-identified herself in terms of her national origin as ‘Eritrean’. Merhawit is a female refugee employee of government. She is twenty-nine and has lived in South Africa for ten years.

When I am completing forms at work I select black. The reason is that there are only a few options given to you to select from. I mean, the question asks you to select, white, black, coloured or indian on the forms. I know in advance before filling out the forms that I have to select black. This is because black South Africans in South Africa have many opportunities. They are given preferences. They
are given priority when it comes to promotions and other work-related opportunities. So you have to be strategic when selecting a race; it has to be the one that opens many doors to opportunities. Genuinely speaking I describe myself as Eritrean. Even though I very much look like coloured when it comes to completing forms I select black always.

The strategic or rational way of self-identifying as a black South African, exemplified by Merhawit, emanated from her belief that identifying as such could facilitate promotion opportunities if and when such situations arose. This calculated way of selecting a black racial category, on forms, at her work place, as opposed to selecting other available racial categories, was a temporary self-identification practice. It was not a self-identification choice which she truly wanted. The identity she truly wanted was based on her national origin as ‘Eritrean’. She only set aside that self-identification practice whenever she encountered racial categories on forms. This experience also reveals that her racial self-identification was, like others, a calculated and conscious decision to benefit from opportunities that came with selecting a black racial category.

**Passing for black to be invisible**

Three study participants (all of them men) also recounted that they, on so many occasions, had tried to pass for a black South Africa as they found it easier to do so due to their perceived phenotypic similarity to black South Africans. Those who reported experiencing racialisation as black by ordinary South Africans were the ones who said they found it easier to pass for black South Africans at different times. Those who said they were perceived as coloured, indian or ambiguous did not recount that they tried to pass for black. Such inability to pass for a black South African was because their perceived racial phenotype did not allow them to be seen as a black South African in their everyday life. All those who said they tried to pass for black South Africans were men; no woman said she attempted to pass for black. The majority of the participants said that the reason for trying to pass as black South Africans was to avoid being marked as a ‘foreigner’ and become a victim of xenophobic violence by random people.

Tedros reported that he tried to pass for a black South African in order to escape xenophobic attacks by complete strangers in Durban city in April 2015. Tedros is a twenty-
seven-year old male refugee business man in Durban and has lived in South Africa for seven years:

Here in Durban no one identifies me as a foreigner because in order to pass for black citizens I had shaved my head. My natural hair is not that kinky but is curly. However, my face is similar to many black South Africans. So if I leave my hair to grow South Africans will easily see that I am not from this country due to my hair. My curly hair makes me different from South Africans. When I shave it, however, it makes me look like other black South African guys. As you are aware, most of the blacks shave their head and I want to look like them. Especially during violent attacks against foreigners I can move around the city because I look like them. Moreover, since I dress like black South Africans no one can notice me.

In Tedros’s case, his attempt to pass for black was not as a result of his given/natural physical appearance but through modifying some parts of his outer body: his hair. In addition to reforming his bodily appearance, Tedros also dressed similar to the perceived ways that black South African males dress. Such a strategy to appear a black South African, in this account, was motivated by a desperate attempt to evade xenophobic attacks against non-South African foreigners.

Habtay also attempted to pass for a black South African. Habtay is thirty-one and is a male asylum-seeker in Durban who has lived in South Africa for nine years. He, however,
emphasised that he did not ‘truly’ self-identify with a black identity category but in a superficial way just to appear black to other South Africans:

As you can see me I look like a black South African because my hair looks like them. My skin colour and my face also resemble theirs. Always whenever I interact with South Africans they think I am one of them. I mean they think I am a black South African. I have lived in this country for many years and I am very good at speaking Zulu. I learned Zulu for the first time in order to communicate with the local people as I sell local food. When I speak Zulu with the locals no one suspects that I am a foreigner because I am fluent in Zulu.

The above excerpt is also another example of passing, but in this case, the passing work done by Habtay did not take place by modifying his body, such as shaving off his head hair to pass for a black South African as was exemplified by Tedros’ experience. Instead, the strategy of passing was made easier by being fluent in the indigenous Zulu language and his perceived similarity in physical appearance to other black South Africans. The above excerpt shows the centrality of language and physical appearance in the process of assimilation into a racial category in the South African context.

Another unique example of passing for black was Fikre’s perceived similarity, in physical appearance, to black South Africans and his attempts to pass for black by not speaking his native language, Tigrinya, when around black South Africans. Fikre is a male refugee from Johannesburg:
Whenever I am in a crowded place especially spaces where there are black South Africans, I prefer not to speak my own native language, Tigrinya, because if I do I will be marked as a foreigner. I mean, I don’t feel comfortable to be visible as a foreigner especially when black South Africans unknown to me are around me.

Me: What is the consequence of speaking Tigrinya around black South Africans?

I don’t know, but get scared. I mean since I look black I would prefer locals to see me as a local black. For example, some criminals may take advantage of you if they know that you are a foreigner and they can even rob you. But if they think that you are a black South African, they can’t think about robbing you. If they know you are a foreigner they think about abusing you and robbing you. That is why I prefer to shut my mouth and be quiet. For example, when my phone rings, where there are blacks, if the caller is a Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean I prefer to be quiet.

In the above excerpt, Fikre attempted to pass for black not by making changes to his bodily features, as was exemplified by Tedros’s account or by adopting an indigenous Zulu language to be invisible, as was seen in Habtay’s account. Interestingly, Fikre attempted to pass for a black South African by refusing to speak a non-South African Tigrinya language for fear of being visible and targeted by criminals in his everyday life. The above example
appears to be unique in that it emphasised the device of silence used by the study participant in an attempt to pass for black, reinforced by the similarity of his physical appearance to other black South Africans.

In the following section, I present examples of those, residing in Cape Town, who self-identified as coloured.

**Self-Identified as Coloured**

All six participants who asserted a coloured self-identification under this sub-theme were residents of Cape Town. However, the participants did not exclusively adopt a coloured racial identity, instead, in the same interview, they had also adopted both ethnicity-based identities, such as Eritrean and ‘Habesha as well as a racial self-identification as black. More notably, one study participant, within the same interview, dismissed racial self-identification as a meaningless practice, however, subsequently identified with a coloured self-identification as demonstrated in the example below. Such inconsistent, contradictory and multiple patterns of self-identifications were shaped by multiple contextual factors. Suárez-Orozco (2004:177) theorized that the everyday self-identification practices of immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers tend to be shaped by a plethora of contextual factors. Three sub-themes were salient in the coloured self-identification of the study participants: coloured is beautiful, I am coloured; I am coloured because of my wife and child; and my physical appearance makes me coloured.

**Coloured is beautiful, I am coloured**

Two participants (both men) reported being racialised as coloured in their everyday social interactions with ordinary South Africans in the city. They viewed being coloured as an identity with attractive physical qualities.

Biniam was frequently mistaken for a coloured South African and had reported that he viewed the concept of race and the practice of racial categorisation as meaningless. However, in the same interview, he preferred to self-identify as coloured, because he viewed coloured as attractive identity. Biniam is thirty-one and is a male refugee businessman in Cape Town:
As I told you even though I said to you that race is meaningless, but sometimes I see myself as coloured because as long as I am in South Africa, I have to have a racial identity. I would prefer to see myself as coloured because coloured people are attractive. I mean, their women are so beautiful and their men are very handsome. Since I also look like them I consider myself coloured. Coloured are attractive and they are more beautiful than other races in South Africa.

Self-identification as coloured was informed by the positive meanings Biniam ascribed to being coloured. This path of self-identification, however, was not consistent for him. He had, in the same interview, viewed race and racial categorisation as meaningless. This path illustrates the fluid and dynamic aspect of racial self-identification for the study participants.

Elias, who previously self-identified as black, also adopted a coloured self-identification informed by his perception of the coloured identity as a category with attractive physical attributes. Elias is a male asylum-seeker business man in Cape Town and has lived in South Africa for four years. Elias had, also in the same interview, constructed an ethnicity-based ‘Eritrean’ national origin identity:

When I looked at how physically attractive coloured people are I told myself I should adopt their identity because I look like them. If you look at my phenotype, it is similar to theirs. Therefore, I am sure people also assume that I am also an attractive coloured person. I mean, I want to be considered attractive like other attractive
coloured people. As you are aware their women are beautiful. Now
I view myself as coloured because I even look like them.

For Elias, particular bodily markers, such as skin colour and facial features are
emphasised as possessing appealing qualities. Elias’ interpretation of what it meant to be
coloured in South Africa was premised on subjective positive meanings he ascribed to
external physical appearances of coloured people in South Africa. The other dimension of
Elias’s self-identification preference is the multiple identities he adopted: an ethnicity-based
‗Eritrean’ identity, a race-based black identity and another race-based coloured racial
identity.

Next, I present examples of self-identification patterns as coloured of study participants
who were influenced by their spouses’ coloured racial status, and the perceived racial status
of their children.

**I am coloured because of my wife and child**

Two study participants recounted (both men) that they self-identified as coloured because
they were married to a coloured spouse or the presumed coloured racial identity of their
children from such union. One study participant, Filimon is a male refugee living in Cape
Town and has a coloured spouse and a son with her. Another study participant, Asmerom,
who is a male asylum-seeker, lives in Cape Town with a coloured spouse but did not have a
child with her. Furthermore, both Asmerom and Filimon had self-identified previously in
terms of his socio-culturally-based Habesha identity. In the following example, Asmerom
said that he self-identified as coloured because of his attachment to his coloured spouse,
Asmerom is twenty-seven, and he is a male refugee university student who has lived in South
African for ten years:

Since I got married to my wife, who is coloured, my self-concept
has changed. I mean, I have started to self-identify as coloured
because of my wife. So in this country my wife made me to adopt a
new racial identity.
Me: But how did your wife make you think you are coloured?

I have been married with my wife for many years now and because of this reason I see myself more as coloured than black. I know that I see myself as Habesha but even though I am Habesha, as long as I am in South Africa, I have realized that I have to have an identity that is meaningful in this country. Now I am mingled with the coloured community through my wife. Even with her family I have a close relationship. And this influenced me to strongly view myself as coloured. Since I am with my wife day and night, we are one racially speaking one.

Asmerom adopted a coloured self-identification due to his marital relationship to his coloured wife, and by extension her family and community. Asmerom had previously reported that he was frequently perceived and racially classified as coloured in Cape Town by ordinary South Africans. His physical appearance, therefore, could also have reinforced and shaped his self-identification in addition to his attachment to his wife’s coloured racial status. As Asmerom’s self-identification pattern showed, he dwelled in two self-identification domains: that of his Habesha self-identification which he asserted in the same interview, and his coloured identity.

Filimon with a coloured wife and a son from the union also relates that he self-identified as coloured because of the racial identity of his wife and his son. According to him, his sense of identity as coloured was shaped due to his biological attachment to his son and his marital bond to his wife. Filimon is twenty-four and he is a male refugee businessman who has lived in South Africa for six years:
After I got married to a coloured woman and had a son with her my self-identity changed. Before I was married to my coloured wife I used to see myself as non-citizen foreigner. Even though people saw me as coloured, before I got married I never considered myself coloured. Ever since I got married I began to see myself more as coloured than a foreigner. This is because as long as we are married we are one. I have a strong attachment to her. My self-concept also changed after my son was born. In South Africa my son is seen as coloured, it is obvious and this has altered how I see myself. After my son was born I started to strongly self-identify as coloured.

Filimon’s self-identification preference as coloured was influenced by his offspring’s perceived racial identity, in addition to his wife’s coloured racial status. Again, this finding appears to be an interesting revelation. However, as Filimon’s account demonstrates, his daily experience of being racialised as coloured, due to his phenotype, could also have contributed in his self-identification as coloured in addition to the influence of the racial identities of his wife and son.

Some other study participants also adopted a coloured self-identification pattern as a result of developing consciousness of their physical appearance. Next, I present examples of two study participants who followed the coloured self-identification path shaped by awareness of their racial phenotype.

My physical appearance makes me coloured

Of the two participants (a woman and a man) who developed a coloured racial consciousness, one of the study participants who self-identified as coloured as a result of being conscious of...
his physical appearance was Simret. Simret is a female refugee university student in Cape Town. She had previously disclosed that in her everyday social interactions with South Africans, she was frequently categorized as coloured due to her physical appearance. Simret also had earlier adopted a black racial self-identification, citing that her circle of friends who were all black influenced her self-identification as black. In this excerpt, however, Simret also asserts a coloured self-identification. Simret cites that her being frequently perceived as coloured and the subsequent phenotype-consciousness she developed shaped how she racially self-identified as coloured.

I know, as I have told you earlier that I feel black due to the fact that I have plenty of black South African friends. I also feel coloured because I have always been mistaken for a coloured woman in Cape Town. This experience influenced me to see myself as coloured. I mean, when I look at my physical appearance I started thinking that I looked coloured. Since always people perceive me as coloured, then I started seeing myself as coloured.

What is interesting about Simret’s self-identifications patterns is the multiplicity of identities she adopted. She specifically self-identified as both black and coloured within the same interview session. Simret had also adopted an ethnicity-based self-identification as Habesha. Overall, therefore, Simret inhabits three self-identification patterns: as black as coloured, and as Habesha. Despite such multiple identity paths, the three patterns of her self-identification were contextually contingent and constructed to suit those contexts, and should not be seen as a symptom of identity confusion experienced by Simret.

Meleake also followed the path of coloured self-identification. Meleake reported that that he gradually became conscious of his new coloured identity as a result of his constant
racialisation experiences by ordinary South Africans in Cape Town. Meleake is a twenty-nine-year old refugee businessman and has lived in South Africa for five years:

Here in Cape Town people see me as coloured. The reason why people see me as coloured is because in my appearance I look like them. I mean, my physical appearance is very similar to a lot of coloured people here in Cape Town and this has shaped the way I self-identify. More recently I started thinking of myself as coloured. I mean, when people routinely perceived me as coloured then started to be conscious of my skin tone, hair texture etc. I mean started to view myself as coloured.

For Meleake, the formation of his coloured racial self-identification was enhanced and accelerated owing to the imposed racial classification in his social interactions with local South Africans. In other words, this continuous experience of being seen as coloured created a sense of self and belonging mirroring the ascribed racial category: coloured. Meleake appears to be socialized into and internalised a South African coloured racial category.

**Discussion**

In total 21 participants self-identified as black and six self-identified as coloured. Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers who self-identified as black were influenced and shaped by a multiplicity of factors and social contexts which accounted for the malleability and contingency of their self-identification practices.

For example, self-identifying as black did not happen as a result of progressive stages which began in encountering imposed black racial identity culminating in the attainment of black self-identification as was predicted by black racial identity development theory (Cross 1995). Instead, self-identification as black was shaped and mediated by numerous factors and
contexts that defied predictable unidirectional stages of black racial identity development. The complex and situational self-identification practices as black however, supports Suárez-Orozco’s (2004: 177) theoretical argument that identity formation of immigrants tend to be fluid and context-dependent.

Viewing the self-identification practices of the study participants through the lenses of adaptation/incorporation theories of immigrants, the identificational adaptation paths of the participants largely challenge Gordon’s (1971) seven-stage assimilation model, Gans’ (1973) straight-line assimilation theory, and Berry’s acculturation theory (1997).

The identificational assimilation into a South African-based black social identity did not occur following predictable stages, such as cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, and marital assimilation as was posited by Gordon’s (1971: 106-108) seven-stage assimilation model. The adoption of a black identity was complex, multifaceted and situated (Suárez-Orozco’s 2004: 177) and shaped by multiple factors and contexts.

The adoption of black self-identification by the first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers also was not wholly supported by Gans’ (1973) straight-line assimilation theory. This theoretical perspective argues that first-generation immigrants/refugees/asylum-seekers strongly identify with their ethnicity, which they brought from their society of origin. The theory further argues that such immigrants generally resist self-identification in terms of identity categories found in the host society. The participants of this study did not wholly follow this pattern of self-identification. For example, an imposed black racial category affected how they subsequently self-identified themselves as black— an identity category of the host society. They also consciously and willingly adopted and integrated a black racial category into their sense of self by forsaking identity categories in their country of origin. Their imagined membership in the black experience also informed their choice to adopt a host country-based black identity category. Other contexts that shaped their adopting of a black identity include: neighbourhood racial composition and their circle of friends. Therefore, as the findings of this study clearly illustrate, one’s generational status was not a determining factor in self-identification practices of the Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa.

As was illustrated by the examples of some study participants, those who self-identified in terms of their ethnicities also adopted a black self-identification — effectively inhabiting two self-identification patterns. This practice of self-identification supports the integration strategy proposed by Berry (1997: 13-14), in which an immigrant integrates self-identification systems both from their country of origin and settlement society.
However, some of the findings did not completely support Berry’s acculturation theory (1997). For example, Berry (1997: 17) argued that immigrants choose to select one of the four adaptation strategies. However, the self-identification practices of the study participants were not only determined by the participant’s autonomous choices but occurred within structural constraints and factors. For instance, some who self-identified as black were constrained by bureaucratic forms which framed their choice of a racial category. Therefore, assimilation into the black social identity of the host society did not occur only as a result of a voluntary choice.

Other participants actively and deliberately decided to adopt a South African black racial category, such as Yoftahe and Selamawit, by forsaking their country of origin identities. Berry (1997: 22) argued that the adaptation strategies for migrating individuals in their society of settlement tend to be shaped by the migration motivation of the individuals concerned. Berry (1997: 22) differentiated between proactive and reactive motivations. According to this argument, persons who left their country of origin voluntarily such as immigrants are categorised as proactive immigrants. The fact that such immigrants have the option of returning to their country of origin, any time, might prompt them to strongly retain their home country-based identities. For example, they may abandon their new society at any time and possibly choose to distance themselves from developing attachment to their new homeland. Other groups such as refugees and asylum-seekers, according to Berry (1997: 22), are categorised under the reactive label, in which they have a limited option of returning to their country of origin anytime soon, and they tend to adopt social identities found in their country of settlement relatively easily.

The participants who self-identified as black through their identification with the black experience of racism and historical subjugation mirror Steve Biko’s notion of blackness in which black consciousness derives from not from one’s physical appearance but rather from one’s political, economic and social position in relation to white supremacy (Biko 1987). For example, even though Weyni was constantly perceived as Indian due to her physical appearance, she did not subscribe to the Apartheid-invented Indian identity, but instead adopted a political identity as black, an identity that also encapsulates coloured and Indian racial categories. The identification of the participants with the black experience of racism and historical oppression and their adoption of a black political identity mirrors Steve Biko’s discourse of ‘Black Consciousness’ (Hirschmann 1990). Steve Biko’s notion of blackness did not refer to one’s physical appearance but rather the inclusion of those identified as Indian and coloured under the rubric of a black political identity as a response to white supremacy.
Such self-identification with a political blackness, therefore, reflects and supports Steve Biko’s discourse of ‘Black Consciousness’.

The racial self-identification as black of some of the participants was shaped by everyday imposition of racial perceptions about their bodies by South Africans. Such finding corroborates empirical studies conducted in other national contexts. For example, Haile recounted that he was constantly ascribed a black racial identity by South Africans and that, over time, tended to shape the way he self-identified. This finding is supported by Asante’s (2012) findings that African immigrants in the U.S. gradually adopted a black racial category due to their everyday racialisation experiences as black and their gradual socialization into the black racial category. According to Suárez-Orozco (2004: 179), externally imposed identity categories, such as racial labels found in the society of settlement, tend to induce immigrants to gradually self-identify in terms of such racial categories found in their country of settlement. Vasquez (2007) also found that immigrants of Mexican origin in the U.S. developed self-identification as Latino/a or Hispanic as a result of self-consciousness about their physical appearances. The unique example of Asmerom, who stated that he felt black under the white gaze also reflects examples of other immigrants who felt black under the white gaze in other countries. For example, Foner (1985) found that, first generation Jamaican immigrants in London and New York felt black and their self-identification as black became heightened as a result of their frequent interactions with and being perceived as black by white Americans and white British.

Other study participants also self-identified as black influenced by the neighbourhoods they lived in. Berry (1997: 25) noted that the neighbourhood ethnic compositions in which immigrants reside shape how immigrants acculturate in their society of settlement. According to Berry (1997: 25-27), those who live in an area predominantly inhabited by members of the host society and interact more with such persons, tend to adopt social identities of the host society, following the assimilation strategy. The findings of this study confirm Berry’s argument. Some of the participants assimilated into a black racial identity as they were embedded in neighbourhoods inhabited by black Africans and South Africans. Other empirical studies also support this finding. A study by Abdulrahim (2008) found that, Arab-Americans’ self-identification patterns were shaped by the neighbourhoods they lived in and the people they frequently interacted with. For example, according to Abdulrahim (2008), Arab-Americans who lived in demographically white areas self-identified as white, while those who lived in demographically non-white areas self-identified as ‘Arab’.
Other participants also disclosed that they self-identified as black shaped by their black friends. The influence of friendship association in self-identification was also supported by Waters’ (1994) findings in that some of her participants from the West Indies as well as Haitian immigrants in New York City self-identified as black influenced by their friendship associations with African Americans. Another study by Awokoya (2012) also found that Nigerian adolescent immigrants in the U.S. self-identified as black when they were around their black American friends. Suárez-Orozco (2004: 183) argued that intense and frequent interactions and relationships with members of the host community shape the self-identification paths of immigrants in the direction of the settlement society’s identity categories. The above examples of self-identification as black, due to the influence of friendships with black South Africans, appears to be an instance of assimilation (Berry 1997: 11-12) of the study participants into the South African black racial category.

The experiences of those who self-identified as black for strategic purposes reflected the post-Apartheid South Africa’s policy of affirmative action. For example, Posel (2001a: 109-110), Neville Alexander (2006: 5), and Seekings and Nattrass (2005: 23-25) note that, for redress and affirmative action purposes, racial categories are used by institutions in post-Apartheid South Africa. Seekings and Nattrass (2005: 25) note that predominantly black identified individuals in South Africa benefit from a diversity of opportunities. The participants’ self-identification preference as black, to gain advantages, is also supported by Vandeyar (2011). She found that adolescent immigrants in South Africa from different African countries preferred to self-identify as black in order to benefit from opportunities that comes with self-identifying as black.

The examples of study participants who attempted to pass as black South African for instrumental reasons to be invisible, were supported by other empirical studies. Scholars such as Handmaker and Parsley (2001), Warner and Finchilescu (2003) Matsinhe (2011), Adjai & Lazaridis (2013) found that non-white immigrants such as blacks from the African continent tend to be easily distinguishable by black South Africans and become targets of xenophobic violence. Furthermore, it echoes Abdi’s (2015) findings on the strategic adoption of blackness of Somali refugees in South Africa during xenophobic incidents to emphasise their Africanness. However, in the case of my participants, they performed perceived blackness by modifying their appearance to blend in.

Vandeyar’s (2011) study of adolescent African immigrants in South Africa also found that her participants, who appeared as black South Africans, attempted to pass for black South Africans to avoid being prejudiced as a ‘foreigner’. Another empirical study by
Golash-Boza (2006) also found that immigrants of Latin American origin in the U.S., who appeared white, worked to pass for white in their everyday social encounters with ordinary Americans in order to appear native white American. However, this finding contrasts with arguments by immigration scholars such as Berry (1997: 13) that experiences of hostility and prejudice prompt immigrants to adopt a country of origin-based self-identifications. On the contrary, in the context of xenophobia, my study participants attempted to assimilate into a black racial identity to avoid being seen as foreigners.

In relation to scholarship on topics of race and racial classification in South Africa, there are novel findings in this study that contributed to the literature. The study participants of this research introduced new ways of self-identification that was not reported in literature on race in South Africa. For instance, Maré (2014: 33) noted that phenotype-based racial self-identification habits persisted in post-Apartheid South Africa. Posel (2001: 51) and Seekings (2008: 5-6) argued that people in contemporary South Africa continued to self-identify in terms of racial categories created in Apartheid era. However, in this study, participants’ self-identification practices as black were not informed only by physical appearance as is customary in South Africa and as was institutionalised historically from the Apartheid-era (phenotype-based habits of Apartheid-reinforced racial self-identification). For example, other factors shaped black self-identification such as: (1) the tendency to adopt a black racial identity due to identification with the history of black oppression; (2) the influence of neighbourhoods one was located in and frequency of social interactions with a particular demographic group; and (3) the influence of friendships in shaping the internalisation of a black South African racial identity. Most of the study participants who followed this path of a black racial self-identification reported that even though they were racialised as Indian and coloured due to their physical appearance (the racial logic behind racial self-identification practices in South Africa), they did not internalise those identities. Instead their choice of a black racial identity transcended their racial phenotype.

All of the participants who self-identified as coloured were based in Cape Town at the time of the interview. Various factors informed and shaped the self-identification practices as coloured, namely their assessment of the coloured category, which they perceived as attractive; attachment to the coloured racial identity of their spouses and offspring, and the influence of constant racialisation of their bodies as coloured. Their self-identification as coloured was not exclusive adopted, but, instead, was juxtaposed alongside their ethnicities and a black racial identity. Such dynamic and context-contingent nature of the participant’s self-identification patterns corroborate Suárez-Orozco’s (2004: 177) argument that self-
identification for immigrants tended to be flexible and fluid as opposed to fixed and constant. Waters (1990) aptly captures this in her theory about the option of ethnic self-identification that white Americans have when they claim their ethnic heritage as ‘Irish’, ‘Italian’ etc, when it is expedient to do so. Those who draw upon their Eritrean ethnicity-based identities, alongside adopting a South African based racial identities, also reflect patterns of ‘optional ethnicity’ (Waters 1990) when convenient to do so.

The association of being coloured as an attractive social category with positive attributes challenged traditional dominant discourses of the coloured racial category in South Africa, which associate coloured with notions of ‘impurity’ (Norval 1996: 119; Farred 2000; Zimitri Erasmus 2001: 13). Norval (1996: 119) and Farred (2000) argued that during the Apartheid era, the coloured racial category was viewed as signifying ‘impurity’. Erasmus (2001: 13) also noted that the coloured racial category, even in the contemporary social imagination of the South African society, is associated with not being white enough and not being black enough. My findings, however, challenge such negative connotations associated with being classified as a coloured person in South Africa: Two participants attributed positive qualities to the ‘coloured’ racial category.

Other surprising aspects of the findings were the influence of having a coloured spouse and a child from the marital union on coloured self-identification patterns of the study participants. I have not found an empirical study that revealed this pattern of self-identification. However, theoretically, it appears to be supported by immigration scholarship. For example, Gordon’s (1971: 108) model proposed that marital assimilation precedes identificational assimilation, in that, when newcomers have a spouse that is a member of the society of settlement, immigrants tend to adopt the social identities of the host society to which their spouses belong.

In relation to the development and internalisation of a coloured racial self-identification, Suárez-Orozco’s (2004: 180) perspective proposed that, during everyday social interactions with members of the society of settlement, immigrants’ self-identification patterns tend to be more strongly shaped by ascribed identities than achieved identities.

On the effect of consciousness of one’s phenotype on racial self-identification, empirical findings by immigration scholars in the U.S. also found that immigrants’ self-identification patterns in the U.S. racial context was largely shaped by awareness of one’s phenotype (Foner 1985; Yarbrough 2010; Asante 2012).

Simret’s triple self-identification strategies, both in terms of her country of origin-based identity as Habesha, and South African-based racial categories as black and coloured
supports Berry (1997: 13), who proposed that some immigrants adopt an integration strategy of adaptation, in that immigrants self-identify both in terms of their country of origin social categories and their country of settlement. Moreover, the multiple and fluid patterns of Simret’s racial self-identification patterns suggest that race and racial self-identification tends to be socio-contextually contingent and malleable as was argued by proponents of the social construction of race (see, Appiah 1992: 44-48; Goldberg 1993: 15-23; Omi and Winant 1994: 34; Root 1998: 630-631). Simret moved between multiple racial categories and identification systems depending on the situation and influenced by contextual factors. Simret did not adopt a single and fixed racial category, across time and space, as proponents of the biological essentialism of race would argue (see Mayr and Ashlock 1991: 104-105).

The assimilation into a South African-based coloured racial category by some study participants did not support the argument about self-identification practices made in Vandeyar (2011) and Vandeyer and Vandeyer’s (2012) studies. The authors’ findings suggested that immigrants predominantly self-identified in terms of ethnicity-based social identities of their countries of origin and resisted self-identification in terms of South African racial identities. My findings, however, showed that some participants incorporated a coloured South African racial category into their sense of self in addition to their ethnicity. The reason for this choice of self-identification appears to be because of their social integration (married to a coloured South African) and the desire to self-identify as coloured due to positive meanings they ascribed to the coloured racial category.

I have not located literature, however, on the coloured racial formation of refugees and asylum-seekers or other categories of migrants in the South African racial context. Much of the literature on coloured racial category focuses on South Africans. There appears to be a paucity of theory and research on how non-South African groups, such as refugees or asylum-seekers internalize and adopt a coloured racial identity in the context of immigration in post-Apartheid South Africa. The findings of this section, therefore, make a contribution to the literature on coloured identity in South Africa.
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

Introduction
This study set out to investigate the little known everyday racialisation experiences and consequent patterns of racial self-identification for Eritrean, foreign-born refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants more generally in the post-Apartheid South African racial landscape. Such a phenomenon has been under-researched by scholars of race, ethnicity and immigration in the South African context. In order to explore this phenomenon, I employed a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis approach and interviewed 46 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers residing in three major South African urban settings, namely Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

The study is broadly conceptualised within a social constructionist philosophical framework. This analytical lens helped me focus on the socially-embedded, complex, and multi-faceted dimensions of everyday racialisation experiences and self-identification practices of the study participants.

Three research questions guided the study, namely: (1) how did first-generation adult Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers experience racialisation in everyday life; (2) how did they give meaning to their imposed racialisation experiences; and (3) how did their racialisation experiences inform/shape their racial self-identification practices in post-apartheid South Africa.

Analysis of the findings yielded that Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers experienced racial categorisation on various official forms including university admission forms, scholarship forms, employment forms, police clearance forms, medical aid forms and hospital forms. They also experienced racial classification by ordinary South Africans in social encounters, in diverse ways: as coloured, as indian, alternately as coloured and indian, as black, and as racially ambiguous. They gave meanings to their experiences of racialisation in different ways: some assessed the black and coloured racial identities in negative terms, while others painted a positive picture of the racial identities.

Some of the participants rejected racial self-identification and adopted a trans-racial global category as ‘human’; others self-identified ethnically in terms of identity categories found in their country of origin, as ‘Eritrean’, ‘Habesha’ and as ‘Tigrinya’. Participants also self-identified in terms of South African racial categories, as black and coloured but never as white or indian.
However, participants’ self-identification patterns were often fluid and multiple, shaped by a number of contextual factors. The contextual circumstances that informed the self-identification practices of the participants include, *inter alia*, physical appearance, language, accent, dress, whom they were interacting with, local social contexts, and the racial composition of the urban settings in which they lived.

The findings of this study make a contribution to three bodies of scholarship, namely the fields of race, racial identities and migration in South Africa; international literature on immigrant adaptation; and the field of Eritrean Diaspora studies.

**Contributions of the Study**

**Race, racial identities and migration in South Africa**

The findings of this study have implications for thinking about the status of race and racial categories in the lived experience of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The experiences and reactions of participants towards imposed bureaucratic racialisation illustrate that selecting a racial category on official forms, which is a normal and ‘routinised’ (Goldberg 2002: 115) practice in both historical and contemporary South Africa, is resisted and de-familiarised as an alien practice. Such findings illustrate that in post-Apartheid South Africa, new foreign-born non-South African communities, such as refugee and asylum-seekers, are perceiving traditional practices of bureaucratic racial categorisation as illegitimate and incompatible with their preferred self-identification practices. The participants’ experiences and reactions to official racial categorisation are reasonable, because the racial categories were never created for them. Ticking a racial identity on official forms was only produced under the influence of structural constraints by providing a limited number of racial categories to be selected.

Everyday racialisation by ordinary South Africans, and their self-identification patterns also revealed important insights into how racial categories are reproduced in post-apartheid South Africa.

First, the everyday racialisation experiences of the study participants have revealed that South African racial categories tend to be perceived in unpredictable ways and tend to change from context to context: how one is perceived racially tend to change from person to person and from place to place. The experiences of the study participants, who reported being perceived alternately as coloured and indian by ordinary South Africans illustrates that South
African racial boundaries, in the everyday social imaginary, appear to be unstable and shifting rather than fixed across people, time and space. This reinforces the social construction and fluidity thesis of race (Omi and Winant 1994; Smedley 1998; Goldberg 2006). Therefore, South African racial categories need to be conceptualised as contextually-contingent and dynamic constructions.

Second, in everyday life, as was shown by the experiences of the participants, racial self-identification practices do not appear to be durable, consistent or fixed. Instead, they tend to be contextually-contingent and their boundaries porous and permeable. The study participants moved back and forth between the racial categories: one can self-identify as coloured and black depending on contextual circumstances. The boundaries of South African racial categories, therefore, are easily transgressed and at times pushed aside to enable individuals to racially self-identify as they wish. In other words, non-South African refugees and asylum-seekers are complicating and re-defining traditional forms of racial self-identification practices in South Africa. As demonstrated in the participants’ accounts, a person does not necessarily inhabit a fixed racial identity continuously, but one’s sense of racial self can shift from moment to moment. Essentialised notions of race and racial categories are also challenged through the findings of the study.

Third, traditional forms of South African self-identification habits are undergoing important transformation as refugees and asylum-seekers bring in their own imported practices of self-identification, thereby hybridising South African ways of self-definition. Traditionally, South African self-identification patterns have been based largely on South African racial and ethnic/tribal categories. With the emergence and settlement of foreign-born non-South African communities, new forms of self-description are being added into the traditional self-identification practices complex. For example, one can become a ‘Habesha’, an ‘Eritrean’, a ‘Tigrinya’ and at the same time black and coloured, effectively integrating multiple country of origin-based self-identification systems into traditional South African self-identification habits. This trend might have the potential to gradually shape and alter, both in everyday life and at the level of official forms, self-identification practices. With the continued demographic shift South Africa is undergoing, as a result of immigrants’ integration and assimilation, the introduction of novel ways of self-definition is not impossible: The American case is an illustration of such a possible trend: with the emergence and increased demographics of immigrants from Latin America and Asia, categories such as ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Asian’ were introduced to reflect such communities in the U.S.
Fourth, in everyday social interactions, the socially familiar notions of South African racial categories were challenged by some of the refugees and asylum-seekers who perceived South African notions of race and racial categories as meaningless. By doing so, they defamiliarise and interrogate familiar ideas and practices of race and racial self-identification. Race and racial categories are seen as abnormal constructions that do not make sense. By rejecting race and racial categories in everyday life, non-South African refugees and asylum-seekers are resisting and protesting against the practice of assigning bodies certain racial labels. Such communities are, effectively, de-legitimating the taken-for-granted practise of racial perception in South Africa. Race or the practice of racial classification, in everyday life, has been, historically and in contemporary life, a normalised notion for most South Africans. However, in post-Apartheid South Africa, and with the settlement of refugee and asylum-seekers communities, race and racial categories are no more accepted as normal identity notions for such communities who continue to reject them in everyday life.

And fifth, theories and meanings attached to a coloured racial category are being re-defined as was illustrated by the accounts of some of the study participants. Such individuals interpreted the coloured racial identity category, in the main, as an appealing and attractive identity. Historically, coloured racial identity was stigmatised and associated with notions of ‘impurity’ or racially ‘incomplete’ (Farred 2000: 1; Erasmus 2001: 13). However, not all the participants reiterated such discourses in their evaluation and assessment of what it means to be coloured racial category. Some participants, instead, perceived a coloured identity to be an attractive identity, with which they eventually identified. This illustrates that, non-South African refugees and asylum-seekers are re-defining and destabilising traditional meanings associated with particular South African racial categories.

Sixth, as was shown by the participants’ accounts, being black or coloured, in everyday life, was not informed by one’s phenotype or descent but by social and extra-somatic factors. Surprisingly, non-phenotypic factors mediated and engendered a black or coloured racial self-identification. As was illustrated in the examples of the study participants, even though a person is perceived as coloured or indian in everyday life, due to their physical appearance, the same individual could self-identify as black, despite their physical appearance. As the participants’ daily experiences revealed, the trans-phenotypic factors that shaped their black identity were: one’s identification with the historically oppressed black South Africans (subscribing to Steve Biko’s notion of Black Consciousness); friendships, and one’s embeddedness in neighbourhoods inhabited predominately by black South Africans. Despite their physical appearance, one can also self-identify as black on institutional forms for
strategic reasons in order to benefit from redress programmes associated with self-identifying as black. Self-identification as coloured was also mediated by other social factors such as having a coloured spouse and offspring. Therefore, the everyday racial self-identification practices of the refugees and asylum-seekers complicate and re-define traditional phenotype-based practices of racial self-identification in South Africa.

This study, furthermore, has implications for the field of South African migration studies. By exploring the everyday racialisation experiences and self-identification practices of Eritreans in three urban settings in South Africa, I have shown that everyday imposed racialisation and complex patterns of racial and ethnic self-identification practices form part of the lived world of such communities. It is surprising, however, given the racialised nature of the South African society, that there seems to be little attention given to the terrain of racialisation processes and racial self-identification practices of foreign-born refugee and immigrant communities in the still race-conscious South African society. Much of the theorising about experiences of refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants in South Africa appears to have ignored race/ racialisation and patterns of adaptation to South African racial identity categories. I, therefore, suggest for scholars theorising and researching migration in the South African context, to incorporate concepts of race/racialisation within the broader field of South African migration studies to account for how migrants of diverse national origin navigate race and racialisation in South African.

The results of this study have important implications for reforming South African racial categories. Numerically, refugees and asylum-seekers, and immigrants more generally, in South Africa continue to increase and gradually maybe re-shaping the demographic picture of the South African society (Vandeyar 2012: 232). Such refugees and asylum-seekers come to South Africa carrying with them self-identification practices familiar to them from their countries of origin. However, for refugees and asylum-seekers who were not familiar with the practise of racial self-identification, their encounter with race in South Africa could pose a challenge to how they adapt to race-based self-identification practices. It should not be understood, therefore, that such groups seamlessly assimilate into social identities found in South Africa. As was illustrated from the experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in this study, many individuals resisted integrating South African social identities into their sense of self. They might choose to still maintain identity categories which they brought from their home countries.

Such a challenge appears to be an important dimension of refugees and asylum-seekers’ adjustment paths in South Africa. I conclude, therefore, that the four racial
categories in South Africa, namely black, coloured, and Indian, are too narrow to accommodate preferred self-identification practices of some non-South Africans such as refugees and asylum-seekers. I think, if other social categories could be included on bureaucratic forms, that reflect the habitual self-identification practices of refugees and asylum-seekers, which they brought from their countries of origin, their integration could be made easier. For example, the inclusion of country of origin as part of identity categories on administrative and bureaucratic forms could be one of the options to consider. This is important for government agencies and institutions to reflect self-identification patterns of nationals of foreign origin in South Africa that are newly integrating into the South African society.

**International literature on immigration and adaptation**

Research in the field of race ethnicity and immigration has been dominated traditionally by scholars focusing on ethnic and racial identity formation of immigrants from the South into the racially organised white majority North settlement societies (Berry 1997: 7). Prominent theories in the field, such as linear assimilation theories presuppose whiteness as a norm and standard against which identificational adjustment of immigrants are measured. Such academically popular theories within Western scholars, however, cannot adequately explain the identificational adaptation of immigrants within racially organised black majority host countries, such as South Africa. As was evidenced from the accounts of this study’s participants, white identity did not feature as a standard against which their racial self-identifications as black or coloured were viewed or a desire to assimilate into a white identity. The tendency was to adapt to either a black racial identity, which represents a majority or to a coloured identity. Such theories tend to be inadequate to reflect identificational adjustment/adaptation directions and patterns within the realm of South-South migration and particularly migration within Sub-Saharan Africa, where whiteness as a host society majority is absent.

Moreover, linear/straight line assimilation theories propose that first generation immigrants self-identify in terms of identity categories which they brought from their countries of origin and that the identity categories found in their host countries. My findings did not wholly support such assumption. For example, most of the first-generation refugees and asylum-seekers of this study adopted identity categories such as black and coloured found in their host country — even those who have not spent many years in the country. The
other assumption of such theories is that with increased time spent in their host countries, immigrants adapt to identity categories of members of their host society. My participants did not wholly follow this prediction; some participants rejected South African identity categories even though they have spent years in the country and still defined themselves in terms of identity categories found in their country of origin.

With regards to acculturation strategies model, even though Berry’s (1997) model of adaptation was useful in interpreting the identificational acculturation patterns of the study participants, their experiences did not neatly map onto the four strategies of acculturation outlined by the model. This could be because adaptation patterns in the lived experience are complicated, messy and difficult to fit into pre-predefined models.

**Eritrean Diaspora studies**

For the field of Eritrean Diaspora Studies, the findings of this study also have important implications. Much of the current literature about Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers has focused on, inter alia, political transnationalism; the experiences of journeys to asylum destinations; deportations and human rights of Eritreans in various national contexts. The exception are the few studies that focused on the racialisation and racial self-identification patterns of Eritreans in their racially organised host societies, such as Shelly Habecker’s (2012) work on Eritreans in the United States and Arnone’s (2011) study of Eritreans in Italy. There is little work that focused on the encounter of Eritreans with racial categorisation in the South African context. In relation to the findings of such works, the South African racial context enabled unique racial self-identification patterns, such as coloured to emerge, which illustrates the importance of national context in the production of racial formation patterns.

The research questions posed and the findings of this study, conducted in the South African context, therefore, extend and enrich the current work on Eritreans’ racialisation experiences elsewhere and, I hope, will prompt scholars of Eritrean studies to engage with issues of racialisation and racial self-identification practices of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in their respective host societies (especially in those host society contexts that are racially organised). The implication is also pertinent for racialisation experiences of asylum-seekers and refugees more generally.

Second, as was revealed in the findings of this study, the concept of race and racial classification has entered the social understanding of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers communities in South Africa. I believe, therefore, this has important implications on the
effect of not only their self-identification practices in South Africa but also in introducing notions of racial categorization to other Eritreans living abroad and back in Eritrea. It has been argued that Eritreans self-identify in non-racial identity categories. However, Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa could export race-thinking back to their compatriots in Eritrea and introduce notions of race in Eritrea in their transnational contact.

In the age of instant communication and virtual world, this is possible.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

There were possible limitations to the study. For example, the fact that I was personally attached to the topic and the phenomenon under study could have shaped the outcome of the study. Like my study participants, I often experience racial classification by ordinary South Africans and on various institutional forms. Therefore, these subjective experiences could have an influence on how I framed the research questions and interpreted the interviews of the participants. In order to reduce the influence of my own bias, I have attempted to remain conscious of my subjectivity throughout the research process in order for the participants to be in control of their interpretation of their everyday experiences. Mentally, I tried to separate my role as an Eritrean refugee from a Tigrinya ethnic group who experienced racialisation often to remain aware of my role in this research. I did so in order to allow readers of this thesis to take into consideration my insider positionality and see for themselves the extent to which this subjectivity might have shaped the overall research process and outcome.

The results of this thesis have opened up other research questions that need to be explored in the future for researchers interested in extending the study of this research. For example, how would second-generation Eritrean immigrants in South Africa racially self-identify? Do they still maintain ethnicity-based self-identifications of their parent? Do they racially self-identify in terms of South African racial categories, or both? Therefore, as this study was focused on first-generation refugees and asylum-seekers, I think future research needs to explore the racialisation experiences and racial-self-identification and/or country of origin-based ethnicity maintenance patterns of second-generation Eritreans in South Africa.

Second, the study is limited in its generalisability in that, since the research was focused on 46 Tigrinya Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers, as a distinct national-origin community, its transferability to other refugee and asylum-seekers communities from diverse national origin is limited. However, my methodology could potentially be applicable to other groups. This is because refugee communities that originate from other countries bring with
them their own respective self-identification practices relevant to their countries. I believe, as a result, the meanings they give to their racialisation experiences and patterns of their racial self-identification may differ reflecting the distinct socio-cultural contexts from which they originate. Bearing this in mind, it would be interesting to conduct research on the everyday racialisation experiences and racial self-identification practices of other non-Eritrean refugees, asylum-seekers or voluntary immigrant communities in South Africa.

Further research is needed to explore how refugee and asylum-seeker communities such as Ethiopians, Somalis and other Eritreans in South Africa who share similar phenotypic appearances are racially perceived by white South Africans.

**Reflections on the Research Process**

Before I embarked on this study, I thought everything would go smoothly during the field work. However, it was not so. When xenophobic attacks broke out in the middle of conducting interviews, I was in the city of in Durban preparing for the next round of interviews. During that time, the situation was tense in Durban and I observed most of my fellow Eritreans were panicking, including myself. Therefore, I had to tell my interviewees that we would resume the interviews after the situation had improved. When I realised that the violence was escalating progressively, I decided to board a bus and returned to Pretoria. I stayed in Pretoria until the xenophobic attacks in Durban stopped. Eventually I returned to Durban when things returned to normal and was back in the field with my study participants.

Some of my interviewees told me that they had to shave off their hair in order to pass for ‘black’ South Africans during the violence. They told me that they were successful in their strategies of remaining invisible. I was surprised. I learned how certain events can produce interesting research results. I also learned how research can be unpredictable and how unforeseen circumstances can hamper a research process and progress. I realised, furthermore, that, as a refugee conducting research about my fellow refugees and asylum-seekers, I shared a similar fate and fear as them during the xenophobic attacks: feelings of being an unwanted outsider, fear, uncertainty, and panic. That experience taught me that I was not only a lucky refugee who is pursuing an academic career but also a vulnerable ‘Other’ exposed to violence as my fellow refugees and asylum-seekers.

The other lesson I learned from interviewing my study participants was that, as they recounted their experiences or racialisation and the different contextual factors that shaped their self-identification choices, they made me aware of my self-identification practices in my everyday life. For example, when my participants told me that they felt black when they lived...
in neighbourhoods inhabited by black Africans, I began to realize that I also feel the same way. I live and socially interact in Sunnyside, a neighbourhood in Pretoria largely inhabited by Africans and black South Africans. I think, sometimes, my location in that neighbourhood makes me feel black. Therefore, while participants recounted their racialisation experiences and self-identifications to me, they reminded me of my own similar experiences and everyday self-identification.
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APPENDIX I: English version semi-structured interview schedule

Briefing interviewees about the nature of the interview

I would like to thank you for your interest in participating in this interview. I am interested to find out how you experience racialisation in South Africa in your everyday life. In order to have a good understanding of your experience, I will focus on three areas of your experience, namely 1) How you experience racialisation in your everyday life in South Africa, and the contexts in which such experience occurs; 2) How you make sense of your racialisation experience; and 3) How you negotiate your Eritrean ethnic identities and whether the experience of racialisation in South Africa has shaped how you racially self-identify. Please kindly feel free to describe your experiences in detail.

Research Question 1: How do adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers experience racialisation on bureaucratic forms and by ordinary South Africans in their everyday lives?

The purpose of this interview is to allow research participants to recount their actual lived racialisation experiences in South Africa.

1. Please describe your experience of being racially identified in your everyday life in South Africa?
2. How often do you get racialised? Please elaborate and give examples, if possible.
3. By whom do you get racialised? Please elaborate and give examples, if possible.
4. In which situations do you get racially identified in South Africa?
5. How does it make you feel/think when someone asked you what race you are?
6. Tell me more about any other aspects of your everyday racialisation experiences?

Research Question 2: How do adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers give meaning to race and the experiences of racialisation in their everyday lives in the race-conscious South African society of settlement?

The purpose of this interview is to let study participants reflect on how they made sense of their lived racialisation experiences in South Africa.

7. What does it mean to be racialised in South Africa as a person coming from a non-racialised society?
8. What sense did you make of your first encounters with the experience of being racially perceived in South Africa?
9. What does it mean for you to be asked what race you are in your everyday encounters in South Africa?
10. What does it mean for you to be perceived as being a member of a particular racial group?

11. What sense do you make of the racial identities in South Africa?

**Research Question 3:** To what extent do adult first-generation Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers racially self-identify as a result of imposed everyday racialisation experiences in South Africa; and how do they retain, shed or negotiate their ethnicity-based and other self-identifications?

The purpose of this interview is to allow study participants to reflect on how they negotiated their ethnic identities when they are racialised in South Africa, and whether the experiences of racialisation have influenced their subsequent racial self-identification practices?

12. To what extent is race a popular identity in Eritrea?

13. To what extent do Eritreans identify each other in terms of race in Eritrea?

14. How did you identify yourself back in Eritrea?

15. To what extent has the experience of racialisation in South Africa conflicted with your ethnic identities?

16. What has been your reaction to being racially identified in your everyday life in South Africa?

17. To what extent do you reject/accept racialised identities?

18. Has racialisation altered your self-concept/self-identification?

19. How would you like to be identified by other people now?

**Experience of the interview**

How did you find the interview session?

**Final question**

Is there anything else which I have not covered about your experiences of racialisation which you think is important to mention?
APPENDIX II: Tigrinya version semi-structured interview schedule


1. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂብካዬ?  ሰብት ያሉት (ሬስ) ቅሇ መንገድ የመ ጊወ ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ከርም ከእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

2. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

3. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

4. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

5. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

6. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义

7. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

8. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ资本主义 

9. ከወ ሰብት ይና የእም ከም ይታይ ትርጉም ሂブ資资本主义
10. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ሲታ ለር ከለ ከስው ይምል ከንን ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

11. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ከለ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

12. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

13. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም ከሊ ተስፋ ያል ጉም?  

14. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

15. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

16. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

17. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

18. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

19. ከም ከሌ ጉዲ ጉዲ ድም ከስው ከጤ ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

ወ. ሲመስ ከሆ ከር ከር ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

የ. ታ መስ ከሆ ከር ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

እ. ሲመስ ከሆ ከር ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?  

እ. ሲመስ ከሆ ከር ያርጉ ያሉ ጉም?