

# Tackling the issue of race in research

More than 450 staff members, students and other stakeholders attended a symposium at Stellenbosch University's (SU) Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) to reflect on the appropriateness of race-based research.



Professor Soraya Bardien, Dr Handri Walters, Professor Leslie Swartz, Professor Jonathan Jansen and Professor Jimmy Volmink

This followed the publication of an article by Nieuwoudt et al in the Department of Sports Science that focused on the relationship between age, education and cognitive function in a sample of so-called 'coloured' women in Cloeteville. The article elicited widespread public outrage from the public and people within and outside SU.



## SU comments on study perpetuating racial stereotyping

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"Given our specific political and social history in South Africa, we are all prone to race thinking, and this undoubtedly influences our science," said Professor Jimmy Volmink, FMHS dean in his opening remarks at the symposium entitled *Race as a variable in scientific research – controversies and concerns*.

"A particularly problematic issue that has been surfaced by the study is the inappropriate use of racial labels or categories in research. Unfortunately, this is a pervasive problem that is not confined to researchers at Stellenbosch University. Evidence of the misuse of race as a variable in research can be found in publications across the spectrum of academic institutions in South Africa and beyond," Volmink said.

Four panellist from various disciplinary backgrounds each gave input on the topic, after which the audience was invited to join in the discussion.

In her talk, Professor Soraya Bardien, a human geneticist at the FMHS' Division of Molecular Biology and Human Genetics, questioned the scientific basis of racial classification. Race is often used in scientific research to refer to biological differences, such as skin colour, facial features and stature of certain groups.

She noted that any two randomly selected humans share on average 99.9% of their DNA. "Less than 0.1% of our DNA account for the physical differences among people that we associate with racial differences. This means that people from different 'racial' backgrounds are much more similar than they are dissimilar," said Bardien, who is also the chairperson for the South African Society for Human Genetics.

While sharing nearly identical DNA, there are differences in how DNA is sequenced between groups. "For example, we see differences in sequences of genes that affect skin pigmentation and in genes that influence resistance to malaria in different geographic regions," she explained.

Quoting a statement by the American Society of Human Genetics, Bardien said that genetics demonstrates that humans cannot be divided into biologically distinct subcategories and that any attempt to use genetics to rank populations shows a fundamental misunderstanding of genetics.

## **Re-interrogating race**

Dr Handri Walters, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at SU, gave a talk entitled *Re-interrogating race in scientific research*, in which she argued that scientists have attempted to study and categorise racial groups for decades.

"Race was regularly employed in scientific studies as a determining factor, and it was seen as something that could be 'known' through rigorous scientific study," said Walters, whose research focused on the history of the academic field of anthropology at SU.

She explained that racial science was based on the concept that there were numerous different racial groups, that racial categories were homogeneous (thereby scientific conclusions about a few members of the group could be extrapolated to the entire group), and that there were certain characteristics by which these groups could be identified.

## **Apartheid's influence**

In South Africa, the concept of racial differentiation was entrenched by the apartheid dispensation that divided the population into four different racial categories. "The laws implemented by the apartheid state certainly shaped the conditions in which designated racial categories had to engage daily life and this has left a lasting legacy in the form of structural inequalities," said Walters. Despite the abolishment of apartheid, these concepts of racial categories persist along with generalisations about the characteristics of each group.

"We need to constantly re-interrogate race in scientific research. We cannot afford to continue its use in an unquestioned and unproblematic manner to draw generalised conclusions based on racial categories. This will result in irresponsible scientific practice. It will keep the ghost of racial science alive and well in the new century," Walters concluded.

## **Who is doing the looking?**

Clinical psychologist and distinguished professor of psychology at SU, Professor Leslie Swartz, also highlighted the ease at

which evolutionism and racism still presents in science. He explained that this occurrence is not limited to South Africa, but can also be seen in esteemed international peer reviewed journals and research produced in the so-called global north.

Swartz – whose research focuses on culture and mental health, as well as disability studies – cautioned against shying away from studying vulnerable populations as it could obscure and perpetuate the social reality of difference. However, he advised scientists to be sensitive to the social environment in which the research takes place, and to be cognisant of their own potential biases.

"The questions that we always have to ask in any science we do is: 'Who is doing the looking?; How are we taking account of the looking?; Who are we looking at? and Why are we looking?' If we could explicitly think about those things, I think we can make some progress on this really difficult issue," Swartz said.

## **The politics of knowledge**

Professor Jonathan Jansen, a distinguished professor of education at SU, reiterated that it is commonplace for researchers to make a causal link to race. Referring to the article by Nieuwoudt et al. which studied the cognitive abilities of coloured women, Jansen said that "it has nothing to do with being coloured and everything to do with where you live and how you live and the socioeconomic circumstances in which you live."

He cautioned scientists to steer away from using racial categories in their research, particularly when it aims to make a connection between race and attitudes, beliefs or abilities. Jansen's own research, which looks at studies by SU scientists on the so-called "coloured" population, has shown that racial categorisation and negative stereotypes are still being perpetuated by science today.

Jansen argued that this problem persists because racial differences and the relationship between race and certain social outcomes "have assumed the status of common sense". He said that the epistemology of knowledge needs to be revised: "it has to do with the nature and the politics of knowledge".

"In conclusion, you have to ask yourself: How is it that this research passed ethical review? How did it get funding from the National Research Foundation? And how did the peer review process of an internal journal approve this? You cannot blame the article [when the problem lies in the system]. We have to ask ourselves: "How do we change the rules of the game?"

**Source:** Stellenbosch University

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