

# SU leads the way with groundbreaking conference on race and human categorisation

When trying to describe the impact of the recent conference on race and human categorisation presented by Stellenbosch University's (SU) Committee for the Institutional Response to the (Khampepe) Commission's Recommendations (CIRCoRe), it's tempting to veer towards clichés such as “groundbreaking”, “close to the bone” and referencing the unearthing of skeletons from the closet.

For an academic conference that confronted such serious subject matter head-on, the atmosphere during the two days was everything but sombre. The topics under discussion might have been weighty and at times even triggering, but the conversations were dynamic and infused with razor-sharp insights that spilled over to teatime and lunch.

By the end of the second day, the atmosphere at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Science (STIAS) conference centre had turned from energised to a cathartic conclusion. There was broad consensus that the opportunity to reflect on racial categorisation was much needed and put SU at the forefront of academic institutions grappling with such issues.

## Interrogating antiquated views

Attended by senior University administrators and top academics, the CIRCoRe conference aimed to critically examine the use of race and other human categorisations in the sciences, particularly in the context of South African higher education. It addressed the problematic use of race in various disciplinary settings, including anthropology, forensics and other scientific fields.

In his opening address, SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor **Prof Wim de Villiers** said at the heart of the discussions is an interrogation of the role of antiquated views about human beings and their groupings in the perpetuation of scientific racism – not only in South Africa but also elsewhere in the world.

“Through the years, scientific racism has taken many forms, all intending to co-opt the authority of science as objective knowledge to justify racial inequality. It's through these rigorous discussions and open discourse that we can work towards eradicating racism and fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment – here and everywhere across our sector,” De Villiers concluded.

In his conference overview the Programme Director **Phila Msimang**, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy and the CIRCoRe Workstream Head for Race, Human Categorisation and Science, said despite the scientific consensus that humans are one species, some studies continue to make unfounded claims about the homogeneity of racial groups. He warned of the subtle ways in which racism can manifest in research design and methods.

Msimang cited cases of problematic science that led to misleading and harmful outcomes. One such example is the controversy about oximeters, he explained. It's been known for some time that pulse oximeters can overestimate the amount of oxygen levels in the blood of people with dark skin which could lead to a delay in treatment or health professionals deciding against treatment. Yet this remains a known problem that medical science is yet to resolve, Msimang pointed out.

“It's not just the fact of the inequalities such science creates, but it also shows how racism works. There doesn't need to be a racist in the room for its effects to continue. Some things are baked into specific technologies, methods and ways of doing,” he noted.

## Young voices

Over the two-day programme, experts from diverse disciplines in social and natural sciences shared the stage with tech experts, administrators and activists. The gathering also provided a platform to critically consider the impact of race categorisation on the institutional and student culture at SU. Some of the most impactful observations came from young academics and students.

A highlight of the conference was the sessions that provided students leaders and young researchers the opportunity to voice their experiences and perspectives. They spoke movingly about challenges such as racial isolation, gender-based violence, language barriers and the challenges faced by black commuter students at SU. They also shared insights on the need for practical solutions to bridge cultural gaps and promote understanding among students from diverse backgrounds.

During the academic presentations, difficult questions were dissected from a multitude of angles. What is the status of the use of race in the health sciences? How do Artificial Intelligence-based systems perpetuate and sometimes amplify social biases? What is the correct way to refer to human populations in genomics research? How should we think about race as a factor for access to SU? How can curricula be adapted to include critical thinking about scientific racism? Why does it matter that the South African fertility industry is saturated with white donors, clients and professionals?

Many of the panellists highlighted the need to critically examine the use of race in scientific research, particularly in disciplines where race is often used as a proxy for other factors. Contributors emphasised the importance of understanding the social and biological relationships between race and other factors to develop more inclusive and equitable research practices.

### **Impactful keynote insights**

The two keynote addresses provided insights that informed many of the presentations and were cited in the resulting discussions. The presentation by **Prof Crain Soudien**, a distinguished sociologist and Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town, was a focal point of the first day's proceedings.

Soudien's talk, titled *Race Approaches and Uses in the Scientific Community*, explored the historical and ongoing challenges posed by racial categorisation in science and academia. He pointed out that while the scientific consensus debunks the notion of biologically discrete races, societal practices and prejudices continue to perpetuate racial stereotypes and inequalities. He referred to the dangers of both biological and social essentialism, arguing for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of race and its impact on social inequities and health disparities. "I would argue we need to use race, but use it carefully," he cautioned.

Soudien said there is reason to celebrate the progress that has been made over the past decades in understanding race and racism. He referred to progressive legal frameworks and constitutions of most countries across the world that acknowledge the historical roots of racism.

"But our constitutions don't tell us how to deal with each other on a daily basis," he noted. While it's commendable that students in social sciences are taught that race is a social construct, it is also important to understand how processes of racialisation work, Soudien said. "The reality is that social dominance continues. We need to understand how our everyday consciousness is constituted in racial terms as probably the dominant aspect of our identity. We need to understand why and how that is."

While race itself may not be real, racism is real, Soudien stressed. "As social science scientists, we need to be immensely interested in hurt and how racism has come to land in people's lives and shaped people's lives. We need to understand racial trauma and the effects of racial trauma."

Soudien pointed out that sociology often focuses on studying subjugated groups such as the poor and marginalised, but rarely examines the dominant groups. He emphasised the importance of understanding how those in positions of power perceive and explain their dominance.

He highlighted two prominent positions emerging in the progressive community globally: "racial realism" and "intersectionality." Racial realism, he said, calls for confronting white supremacy, acknowledging the reality of blackness and understanding its cultural significance. Intersectionality, on the other hand, emphasises the need to understand how various factors, such as race, gender and socioeconomic status, intersect and impact individuals' lived experiences.

While he is sympathetic to the outrage underlying the decolonial movement, Soudien questioned the efficacy of outrage alone. “We need a strategy. We need a new way of dealing with what dominance is all about. We need cognitive and practical tools to move forward. We’ve got to be a whole lot more experimental. Although we’re a long, long way from where we were twenty years ago, we still have these blind spots which we must constantly be aware of because they loop back in different disguises.”

In conclusion Soudien urged the audience to embrace difference. “But I’m not interested in prioritising and favouring particular forms of difference over others. And whatever that difference is, difference needs to be always accompanied by unconditional dignity. It’s really difficult for us to live up to that, but we have to have to try.”

### **‘Teach the crime, don’t hide it’**

On the second day of the conference, **Prof Jonathan Jansen**, Distinguished Professor of Education at SU, shared some provocative insights and anecdotes from his encounters with racism in academic institutions. In his keynote address, Jansen used a phrase that became a bit of a buzz word for the rest of the conference. Inspired by the image of a woman who showed up at her daughter’s school in pyjamas, Jansen coined a metaphor – “pyjama people” – to describe how modern-day racism often operates in disguise.

“I think we must realise that thirty years into our democracy, race doesn’t show up in its pyjamas anymore. It’s become more sophisticated in how it represents itself. They no longer use bad words and horrible deeds, only now and again. When you talk about race it’s not something that floats around free of biases. It’s there in everything we do,” Jansen said.

He urged the audience to agree on two propositions. The first is that race is a social construct. “There’s no basis in science for it. It’s made up. But it does have very real consequences in the lives of people. Can we also agree that even though the racial laws that separated us are long gone, we still behave as if they are there.”

Jansen emphasised the challenges posed by racial affiliations within academic settings, noting how these affiliations can perpetuate segregation and hinder genuine integration and inclusivity. He pointed out that race carries itself through very powerful institutional networks which he labelled “authoritarian diktat”. “When you talk race, understand its operations, both visible and invisible in the life of an institution. What would ordinarily be regarded as democratic tradition on university campuses now becomes another way of suppressing ideas, concerns or resistance.”

Jansen cautioned the continued focus on racial categories is of limited value for social or institutional analysis and even less useful for purposes of change. “The narrow focus on racial categories directs attention away from the insidious ways in which the pyjama people still have their hands on the levers of power,” he concluded.

Acknowledging the symbolic value of measures addressing racism, Jansen also stressed the need for greater cultural and structural changes to eradicate racism. He left the audience with a powerful reminder: “We are pedagogical institutions in the old Dutch meaning of the word *pedagogiek*. You teach the crime. You don’t hide the crime.”

### **Pioneering effort**

The event concluded with a vote of thanks from **Prof Deresh Ramjugernath**, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching. He described the conference as a pioneering effort and called for actionable steps and continuous learning to foster inclusive spaces and challenge systemic inequalities. He stressed the importance of collaborative action and policy reform to achieve greater equity in academia and beyond.

“The discussions have highlighted that although human categorisation can be a tool for understanding diversity, it often perpetuates stereotypes and systemic inequalities,” Ramjugernath noted. “These dualities remind us of the importance of approaching these topics with sensitivity and nuance, but mainly with a commitment to equity. We have heard from scholars who have shed light on how categorisations

have historically been used to divide and oppress. Yet, we must remain inspired by stories of resilience, stories of unity, and the ongoing efforts to challenge and dismantle these harmful structures.”

Ramjugernath thanked the keynote speakers, panellists, organisers and participants for their contributions, highlighting the significance of the discussions in driving forward the University’s transformation agenda. He reiterated SU’s commitment to addressing the legacies of colonialism and apartheid and to fostering an environment where all individuals feel valued and heard.

As the CIRCoRE Conference ended, it left participants with a clear message: the work of addressing race and human categorisation is far from over. The insights and recommendations from the CIRCoRe conference will inform future policies and initiatives at SU, contributing to a broader movement towards social justice and inclusivity at SU and in South African higher education.

### **Feedback from participants:**

#### **Thembaletu Seyisi (Research officer: Law Reform, Data Interface & Outreach at the Centre for Social Justice):**

“I was thrilled to partake in the CIRCoRe conference and hugely impressed by the compassion that characterised the very difficult conversations. I have no doubt that the conference has influenced how we will relate to each other as staff, students, colleagues & employees going forward.”

#### **Dr Ronel Retief (Registrar: SU)**

“The CIRCoRe Conference provided valuable insights in and critiques of the use of race and human categorisation in the higher education context. As much as I found the presentations interesting and impactful, it was the personal stories of participants that I found deeply moving and transformative.”

#### **Brandon Como (Events Safety Risk Manager at Facilities Management):**

“One of the most significant takeaways for me is the genuine and urgent commitment from the institution and attendees to move beyond mere discussion and explore practical ways to implement the complex topics addressed. Witnessing natural science colleagues grapple with issues that social scientists encounter daily, and their eagerness to integrate these topics into their work, was an exciting and positive sign of co-creation across academic and institutional boundaries. This collaborative approach signifies a promising shift towards interdisciplinary efforts and actionable outcomes. *Halala Stellenbosch Halala!*”

#### **Geola Bergman (Graphic designer, Corporate Communications and Marketing):**

“The conference exceeded my expectations. The open dialogue it fostered, as well as the networking it sparked between various institutions and SU staff, was quite a revelation. As a PASS environment staff member, I was exposed to research by academics and students that stretched my brain. Hearing about the lens through which science and research were, and to a degree still are, being approached was very surprising. The topics demystified issues that I was not aware of. I found value in every talk; I felt a closer alignment with some but learned through everything. Talking to other institutions about similar issues was also a revelation – it was a much-needed conference. I hope that an in-depth staff conference will also be on the table, as we need to unearth what lies beneath.”

#### **Sammy Chordnum (BA Humanities student):**

“The CIRCoRe conference exceeded all of my expectations. Not only was the conference well organised, but it was nothing short of inspiring. I was one of delegates who couldn't sleep after the first day. The work and research being done to combat institutional racism and knowledge production in SU, is nothing short of world-class. Accurate, vibrant and insightful engagement from delegates in the crowd was the cherry on top of the cake. What a privilege it was to present at this year's CIRCoRe conference, I absolutely cannot wait for the next.”

#### **Abongile Quthu (SRC Vice President and postgraduate student):**

“I found the conference to be a deeply transformative experience. The environment fostered an ethos of learning, unlearning and relearning, which was both palpable and intellectually stimulating. The

discussions, led by numerous distinguished scholars and students, delved into the multifaceted topics of race and human categorisation. These explorations were not only academically rigorous but also imbued with a sense of humanity that made the concepts more relatable and comprehensible.

“For me as an aspiring scholar in the humanities, the conference was particularly significant. It highlighted the centrality of human experiences in shaping our understanding of race and categorisation within the higher education sector, a microcosm reflective of broader societal dynamics. The insights gained were instrumental in enhancing my knowledge and refining my perspectives on these critical issues.

“Overall, the conference was a rewarding opportunity that has enriched my academic journey. It has imbued me with hope and encouragement, reinforcing my commitment to advocating for transformation within higher education and beyond. I feel cultivated and inspired to continue contributing to scholarly discourse on race, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.”

**Prof Juliana Claassens (Professor of Old Testament, Faculty of Theology)**

“I was struck by an undergraduate participant who said he was at this conference to make sense of his complicated journey with race and gender at SU. As he shared an exceedingly traumatic memory of what happened to him in one of the residences, I realised the real purpose of what we are doing at this conference and in CIRCoRe in general. As I said in my contribution on the hermeneutical labour of making sense of the complicated reality and representation of gender, sexuality and race in biblical literature, as well as in the contexts in which we live, we are here to help students deal with the wounds of the past, generating alternative life-giving ways of speaking about gender, race, and sexuality.”

**Dr Tanya de Villiers-Botha (Senior lecturer: Philosophy)**

“The conference provided valuable insights into the complexities of using race and other human categories in the context of research across a wide range of disciplines. What stood out was the need for interdisciplinary awareness and careful, nuanced discussion and collaboration between disciplines.”

**Bantubonke Louw (Senior Manager: Academic Administration)**

“Recognising our institution’s complex history, we are called to a collective commitment to transformation work in our various environments. This requires intentionality and actively identifying and dismantling practices that perpetuate race-, language- and gender-based prejudice and systematic inequalities.

“The inter- and transdisciplinary lenses through which participants engaged with the topics was informative and inspiring. I was deeply struck by the various calls for this to not be just another performative exercise for the institution; the authentic, vulnerable and robust conversations mirrored the sentiments of Brené Brown who teaches us the concept of embracing discomfort as an important catalyst for transformation.

“It is my hope that we’ll embrace intentionality and discomfort more readily as an institution, as we engage with the complex issues of transformation, institutional culture, student and residence life, and redress. If we agree to move forward together in a meaningful way, then we must sustain our transformation efforts by means of intentional, authentic, and regular engagement with difficult issues. As William P. Young observes: ‘Transformation without work and [discomfort]... is just an illusion of true change’.”

**THE END**