

Response to the Article “Age and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women”

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Introduction

Many of us who do research as academics rarely reflect on what we do when we do research. We have internalised the rules of methodology and research practice to the extent that it becomes second nature. But then at some point something happens to force us to reflect on what we do when we do research. What brought us together here today was the use of race as a category in research in a simplistic, unreflective and essentialised way that stigmatised the subjects of the research and deeply wounded the entire community, especially women, that was classified as coloured under apartheid. I do not want to dwell on the article, but I want to talk about what we can learn from feminist research that take the intersectionalities of identities such as race, gender, class and sexual orientation seriously, and this will implicitly show what is wrong with the research on which the article is based.

There are points of view that we should do away with race as a variable in research. What is meant here is a rejection of the deeply ideological and essentialised identity categories that were created under apartheid. These categories were used to justify apartheid practices of segregation and oppression according to race essentialism. But as a social scientist I argue that we cannot do away with race as an explanatory variable. For the type of survey research that I do most demographic variables, such as race, gender, age, class, educational levels etc are used to explain attitudes and how these attitudes influence behaviour. In relation to the recent election we needed, for example, to understand whether young people voted differently from other age categories and we correlated age with race, gender, and educational levels. All these variables are important to understand certain political phenomena. Without them we face a population of uncategorised people about which we, as scientists, can say more or less nothing. In other words social scientists need these variables to be able to explain behaviour. That does not mean that it justifies using race in a way that continues the stigmatising effects of imposed categories, rather than to use them in a way that is transformative.

So, let me turn to what we can learn from feminist research. Here I want to draw on the work of Sandra Harding, a feminist scholar who has written extensively about research processes.

Harding asks that we distinguish among method, methodology and epistemology:

- Method is a technique for gathering evidence – whether it is through surveys, face to face open ended interviews, observing behaviour or analysing discourse.
- Methodology is a short hand term for a theoretical or practical idea to be explored through a set of tools (the method) that will specify what is to be investigated, what is appropriate and what is sufficient evidence, how should it be produced and what counts as good arguments about the evidence.
- Epistemology is a theory of knowledge that is concerned with who can be “knowers”, and what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimate knowledge.

These three aspects of research are distinct but to a large extent determine how we go about our research and to what extent we generate legitimate knowledge.

Harding distinguishes between the context of discovery and the context of justification. The context of discovery is the research questions that we ask, while the context of justification is the methods we use.

One of the most important aspects of feminist research is a praxis and what this praxis means is that we should be self-reflexive about our research. In order to do that we have to put ourselves as Harding calls it “on the same critical plane as the overt subject matter” (put yourself in their shoes) thereby reflecting on our own positionality as researchers. This means that our own class, race, culture and gender assumptions/biases and beliefs must be placed in the context of the research so that we reflect on how we influence the research context. If I enter a research context I need to reflect on the fact that I am white, middle class and highly educated – and how my presence will be experienced in that research context.

Any method therefore can yield results, but it is the context of discovery that is important. What type of questions do we ask? And how do we interpret that data we have collected to answer these questions? Do we put ourselves on the same critical plane as the research subjects and what do we learn from the context in which we do research? Do we allow the research subject’s understanding of her own reality to contribute to our own understanding? Do we take into consideration that research contexts are grounded and specific, and that reflexivity is a continuous process?

These are not trivial questions because they refer to the relations of power between the researcher and the research subjects. Research is never value free and it is always embedded in relations of power.

These relations of power is what Michel Foucault referred to as regimes of truth – in other words that we establish what we consider truth through scientific processes. As was said about his work regimes of truth are the result of scientific discourses and institutions and are reinforced through the education system and the media. There is not some absolute truth, but it is a battle about the rules according to which true and false are separated and

specific effects of power are attached to the truth [<https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/>]. What this means is that through the discourse that we use when we do research and when we interpret data we establish some type of truth through the rules of research practice. This “truth” then becomes the accepted ideas about our research subjects. This should explain why there was such an outcry about the article that brought us here today and the deep hurt it inflicted.

The process of knowledge creation in which we engage through research is never value neutral and often highly politicized. Feminist research has at its core the desire to produce a more just world. So, it is not only doing research for the sake of research, but to utilize the outcomes of the research for some intervention, with a deep understanding that knowledge is constructed from where the researcher is situated. In this regard we also have to think about issues of representation, in other words how do we represent the voices of our research subjects. It should never be speaking about them, but speaking for them in nuanced ways that capture their own voices.

Let me return to the issue of intersectionality. Identity categories such as race, gender, class and sexual orientation are not neatly separable. There are a complex and dynamic interaction between these categories in what we can call a matrix of domination where women are differently located from each other because of the dynamic interaction among different identities. It is therefore very difficult to make generalizations about women’s experience. In South Africa, the racially defined categories that are still used locate women differently and very often determine life chances and opportunities. It was black feminists who gave us the concept of intersectionality to work with. To now argue that we should not use race as a category to interpret the social world will eliminate the explanatory power of this concept and its use in research. How will we understand how race locates women in relation to colonial and apartheid oppression or in relation to, for example, white privilege, without the use of race as a category?

How do we at SU go forward from here to re-structure the research culture at Stellenbosch University. It cannot be a one dimensional approach. But it will also mean that the social sciences will have to be taken much more seriously. For years scholars in the social sciences and humanities have warned that they are being treated as less valuable because they are less marketable (I don’t necessarily believe this), but good social science grapples with the questions about what is good research, what are the right research questions to ask, how do we transform our own research praxis etc. These skills of critical thinking and analytical astuteness that good social science cultivate are invaluable in processes of social transformation. The obligation of transformation cannot only be left to the underfunded social sciences. All faculties at SU need to grapple with the legacies of the racialization of this society and how to change it.

Today starts a discussion but we will have to grapple seriously with issues such as what is good research and bad research, what is legitimate knowledge gathered through valid

processes that do not rely on Eurocentric measures, but are crafted by ourselves for grounded research contexts. Feminists scholars have for years offered models that can be used.

Thank you