Re-Interrogating Race in Scientific Research
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Symposium: Re-structuring Science and Research at Stellenbosch University
Stellenbosch University Library, 21 May 2019

In 1925 Stellenbosch University launched a project to measure its white, Dutch-speaking students. The study consisted of 130 participants who were subjected to 70 bodily measurements, 49 measurements of the head and facial features, and included observations that related to their skin, eye and hair colour. When the results were published the researchers concluded that the participants were (1) of Western European descent, and (2) ranked among the tall races of Europe. The conclusions drawn were extended to an entire South African population of Dutch descent (Afrikaner) – linking particular characteristics to this designated group of people. But these conclusions would not have been applicable to me or so many others that I know.

The 1925 study needs to be viewed in the context of the time. It stemmed from the field of physical anthropology at the height of the global eugenics movement and a burgeoning Afrikaner nationalist movement. It came at a time when race, in all its assumed manifestations, was regularly employed in scientific studies as a determining factor. What I mean by this is that race was seen as something that could be 'known' through rigorous scientific study. This was premised on the idea that race exist in plural form (racial 'types'); that racial categories were homogeneous collectives (thereby scientific conclusions about a few members of the group could be transferred to the entire group); and that each racial category had an encompassing set of characteristics, unique to the category, through which it could be identified. In other words, there was an 'essence' to be found – not only speaking to visible characteristics but also behavioural traits (which included temperament and intellectual ability) and that these traits were inherent and inescapable. It was the era of racial science, and it was a global science.

For decades scientists tried to make race their constant – the unchangeable factor to which everything else could be related. The certainty with which conclusions were drawn and racial types described completely disguised the shaky foundations on which the science was built. At no point was there any real consensus about the number of races found on earth. By the early 20th century some postulated the existence of three separate races, others as many as 60 – with varying numbers in between. In terms of human measurement, and the conclusions drawn from it, you would also find that studies of the same collective (or type) could render polar opposite results (depending on who was doing the study and dictating the results). And finally, no generalization pertaining to a specific category would ever hold.

Indeed, for decades scientist tried to make race their constant, and for decades they got it wrong. The science was flawed because it was fixated on a false determining factor. But some scientists identified this flaw fairly early on. By 1913 anthropologist Franz Boas used the science of measurement to illustrate that

environmental conditions were far more influential in the development of human beings than biological determinism. His ideas were rejected at the time only to be embraced a few decades later.

In the wake of World War II and the atrocities in Nazi Germany, UNESCO declared race to be a myth. This statement on race did not question the existence of human variation, but rather questioned the common-sense understanding of race at the time. Supposed racial categories were not homogenous, these categories could not be essentialized, and these categories were not determinant and inescapable. It declared once and for all that we are a single human race, not plural races. And while we can acknowledge visible and invisible variations exist as the result of evolution over thousands of years that occurred in accordance with immediate geographical environment, these visible manifestations of difference cannot be neatly categorized into homogenous groups. These visible manifestations also cannot tell us much about behaviour or capability.

In South Africa we are faced with a particular challenge in this regard. While UNESCO was declaring race to be a myth in 1950, South Africa was in the process of implementing laws to govern their four designated racial categories. Crain Soudien (2006:56) argues that in South Africa racial differentiation involved the empirical recognition of a human category "[which] then [became] systematically classifiable and, like any zoological species, available as an object of knowledge for inspection and analysis". And through scientific study these categories were solidified in South Africa. And through daily practices of racial categorization they were solidified in South African minds. Pierre Bourdieu (1977:82) employs his notion of "durable dispositions" to refer to "a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles."

My research has dealt with the history of science, more specifically the history of anthropology at Stellenbosch University over the past century. This history included physical anthropology (or human measurement) as taught in the zoology department, and social anthropology - as part of the social sciences. To some extent my research scrutinized the science itself, the epistemology, and the concepts employed. It is particularly the use of race and racial categories that I question in my research. Many of the studies produced by Stellenbosch University from the 1920s to the 1960s never questioned the existence of racial categories themselves. For instance the copious amounts of studies that related to the so-called 'coloured' population departed from the assumption that "coloured" was a homogeneous grouping and that scientific study could expand our knowledge about this category of people.

Even UNESCOs statement that declared race to be a myth did not completely erase this type of thinking from scientific and state practices. 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. The common understandings of these categories that we have been left with, or that we inherited, are often plagued by notions of essentialism and homogeneity, and generalizations flow with relative ease from these assumptions. And this really speaks to a long history of racial science where a causal link is made between your supposed racial category and some characteristic that you exhibit (or should exhibit):

Tall *because* you are of European descent; a body that is predisposed for menial labour *because* you are black; or low cognitive functioning because you are coloured.

These slippages still occur too quickly and too frequently. We cannot continue along the same path for these categories in themselves cannot relay accurate information.

What is race supposed to tell us? How useful is this concept in the majority of studies that we conduct? In South Africa we have started using these categories in science as a shortcut to try and explain what we are dealing with in a seemingly all-encompassing way. But these categories still require critical engagement every time we choose to employ them. We constantly need to remind ourselves that these categories are social constructions, that they are not homogeneous, that they are not defined by an 'essence', that we can't generalize based on these categories, and that, more often than not, the conclusions we arrive at are related to something other than our participant's racial category.

For instance, allow me to say that the recent study *Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Coloured South African women* did not offer conclusions about "coloured" women as it claimed. The conclusions could have pertained to *any* individual that would have been exposed to a particular set of environmental circumstance (as Franz Boas argued early in the 20th century). And granted, through systemic structural violence environmental factors have had generational effects, and in South Africa these are to some extent captured in the racial categories employed by the state. We need to keep this in mind in addressing our past yes. But what the study in question has done is to locate low cognitive functioning within a particular category of people based on race. 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 generalized 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.