



Controversies in the use of race and other human categorisations in the South African Higher Education sector

Date and time: 12 – 13 June 2024 from 9 AM to 5 PM

Call for papers

Stellenbosch University (SU) will be hosting the conference *Controversies in the use of race and other human categorisations in the South African Higher Education sector* at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS). This conference will be hosted at STIAS from 12 – 13 June 2024 and is organised by the Committee for the Institutional Response to the Commission's Recommendations (CIRCoRe) Workstream IV: Race, Human Categorisation and Science. The conference aims to interrogate the case for the use of human group descriptors in the sciences with a focus on the use of race and its attendant problems. These are such problems as the questionable use of race in various disciplinary settings in the social and natural sciences, from anthropology to forensics. This conference also aims to explore the role of antiquated views about human beings and their groupings in the perpetuation of scientific racism in South Africa.

A comprehensive investigation into how race is used in contemporary South African science and a reckoning of the state of contemporary scientific racism in South Africa is well-overdue. Although this is not a topic that can be comprehensively addressed in a single conference, the purpose of this conference is to broach this issue by initiating new traditions of investigation. These new traditions of investigation will aid in the development of solutions to the problems that have arisen out of the use of race and other human categorisations in the sciences. There is already a considerable literature about the problems with *historical* racial thinking and the scientific racism of previous periods in South Africa, but there are relatively few studies that trace the legacy of racial thinking in South Africa into present day research practice and research ethics controversies as they have become manifest across the Higher Education sector in South Africa today.¹

A series of controversial research articles over the last five years, following a long tradition of scientific racism in South Africa, have been catalytic to raising the problems of using race and other human categorisations in science to a question of national importance in the

¹ A few recent books that take the historical view as illuminating on the problems that we have today in the sciences and research ethics are Christa Kuljian's (2016) *Darwin's Hunch: Science, Race and the Search for Human Origins*; Jonathan Jansen and Cyril Walters' (2020) *Fault Lines: A primer on race, science and society*; Alan Morris's (2022) *Bones and Bodies: How South African Scientists*; and Jonathan Jansen and Jess Auerbach's (2023) *The Politics of Knowledge in the Biomedical Sciences* among others.

research agendas of institutions across the country. These problems, and their possible resolutions, have been recognised to have significant through-going implications for university policies, research practices, ethics committee deliberations, and teaching practices across the Higher Education sector of South Africa. Yet the response to these controversies and the rise of the question of the use of race and other human categorisations in science has been mostly reactive and organised around specific institutional responses to racist research at the institutions responsible for their publication. Deeper critical questions about the nature of scientific research and its reproduction of these issues are yet to be broached in a general fashion.

The problems that will be dealt with in this conference and the lessons to be learnt will be relevant to institutions across the South African Higher Education sector. Each individual incident at Stellenbosch University and other institutions of Higher Education of controversial research that implicates the use of race and other human categorisations in science can serve as a case study for drawing more general lessons about the research enterprise. We can use these diverse case studies to collate the lessons learnt from various experiences and craft possible recommendations about how we are to move forward in improving scientific practice at specific institutions like Stellenbosch University and the Higher Education sector in South Africa as a whole.

Conference themes

In exploring the ethical and scientific controversies of the use of race and other human categorisations in science, the scientific committee of this conference encourages contributions that will deal with the themes mentioned below.

- What are the controversies in respect to the use of race and other human categorisations in peer review, research ethics committee approval processes or deliberations, study design, and other research practices? What has been done about these problems?
- What methodological practices and ways of handling data about groups undermine poor scientific practices and support better inferences (e.g., data disaggregation along numerous relevant dimension)?
- What is the status of the use of race in the health sciences? What is the state of the contemporary debate about the use of race in health in South Africa?
- What are different disciplines teaching about race? Is there a diversity in the conceptualisation of race evident across disciplines, institutions, and the Higher Education sector in South Africa? What consequences does this have for teaching, training, and the research and students we produce?
- Should racial classifications be used in the handling of human remains, forensics, or in the classification of living humans in clinical settings? What are the controversies and best practices in this regard?
- How do research practices in South Africa support problematic uses of race and other human categorisations in science, and what should be done about them?

- What are the research-led strategies pertaining to student placement, student experience, and academic outcomes in relation to the use of race and other human categorisations such as gender and disability? How are these categories used in decision making about students and their placement in residences? How do these strategies translate into student experience, academic outcomes, and the goals of institutional and Higher Education transformation?
- What are the reasons for the inequitable demographics of academia along the dimensions of race and other human categorisations like gender and disability status? What kinds of interventions are there that are tackling the problem in South African institutions of Higher Education and what kinds of interventions have promising potential in this regard?
- What categories are used in university admissions policies, how are decision matrices for admissions designed, and why they are set up the way that they are (e.g., what is the justification for the relative weightings of race vs SES, etc.)?
- How far are institutions in Higher Education in South Africa from reaching their transformation goals? What does research say are the impediments to reaching these goals, and how does this affect specific institutions and their operations?
- What issues arise in respect to best practices in the management of data about race and ethnicity?
- How is data about race in research, policy, planning, and other contexts of the university to produced where appropriate and managed when such data has already been created? Are there legal and ethical limitations to the use of such data?

Overall, papers for this conference should be engaging with the problems with the use of race and other human categorisations in science, policy implementation settings, and in research across academic disciplines. We are soliciting papers that assess or aim to establish what the best practices are for dealing with these problems, that deal with where best practices or actual policy and present-day scientific practice fall short, and where new practices need to be developed and established to make headway on developing trustworthy, equitable, reliable, and scientifically valid practices.

Structure of conference

This conference will comprise of themed sessions across two days at STIAS. Each day will begin with an opening talk to frame the themes of the day. The regular sessions of the conference will be a series of panel plenary sessions on both days amongst which there will be a keynote address on each day. Each day will end with a summary of the day's pertinent points and a dialogue session in which the issues that have arisen.

Submission of abstracts

Submission deadline: 19 April 2024

Communication of acceptances: 3 May 2024

Submissions are to be addressed to the RHCS conference Organising Committee using the e-mail address: RHCS@sun.ac.za.

Registration and costs

- Fulltime faculty at a South African university: R1500
- Postdocs, students, adjunct staff, and research associates: R1000
- Non-academic staff: R1000
- General public: R1000

There is a limited number of seats available for this conference. Payment details will be communicated to successful applicants to the conference.
