

Stellenbosch University (SU) Library Auditorium, Rooiplein,  
Tuesday, 21 May 2019, 9:00 to 13:10

### **Anti-Racism vs. Non-racialism? A Fork in the road**

Nadine Bowers Du Toit  
(Unit for Religion and Development Research)

Recently in a telephone conversation with a colleague we reflected on the term non-racial. From a Unity Movement perspective during the struggle years, this was a rallying call to recognize the human dignity of all– and therefore a call to recognise more especially those who were accorded little dignity under the Apartheid system (namely people of colour). Non racialism - “as a state in which the race to which a person purportedly belongs is irrelevant to their social, psychological and material well-being – is not a state in which races do not exist” nor is it our current reality (Msimang 2018). Is it an ideal towards which we must work? Certainly – it is also enshrined in our Constitution.

I want to emphatically state on this point, that it is important, therefore, to distinguish between the calls for non-racialism in the past and the kind of ‘colour-blind’ non-racialism (or post-race discourse) on the rise today, which ignores the way in which people of colour have been systemically disadvantaged and discriminated against in order to promote politically correct liberal notions that racism and white privilege no longer exist.

What is my point with regards to research ethics? In some discussions on campus, the question has arisen whether studies – due to the sensitivity around race- based research as highlighted by the “coloured women” study (if it can even be called a legitimate study!) – with race as a variable, should be considered at all or whether we should simply discard race due to this sensitivity. This approach for me, however, smacks of the non-racial or post-race discourse approach.

Implicit biases occur even among those who profess to be impartial, such as judges (and in our case academics); and while “these biases do not necessarily correspond with our professed beliefs and views, they generally favour our own group and affect our actual behavior” (Wykstra 2017:143). While these researchers would no doubt openly reject the Wilcox Commission findings today (and let me just say we need to change the name of that building ASAP): What biases regarding coloured women were implicitly held by the researchers that would allow them to think this kind of research is acceptable and even scientific? These are not a few ‘bad apples’, rather they are signifiers of a broader systemic issue. I would argue, therefore, that it is not the use of race terminology or race classification that is the issue, but (and I quote) “that we still internalize racial practices and values related to classificatory schemes rather than the issue hinging on the existence and use of racial terminology as a classificatory scheme”(Msimang 2018:51; cf. Vally & Dalamba 1999). Doing away with racial terminology and classifications, will not do away with racialized ways of thinking.

My call is, therefore, for an anti-racism approach, which acknowledges not only the pain of the past, but also seeks to unmask and engage racist, classist and patriarchal practices within

systems. We must be intersectional. The latter recognizes that institutions, such as our university, have a long history of problematic and racist, race based research and practice. It also recognizes that we must and can do better.

One of the questions many people are asking is: “what kind of environment would allow such a study to take place in the first place?”. I would like to venture that is an environment which has not paid enough attention to implicit racial bias and what our Transformation Plan terms ‘qualitative transformation’. Qualitative transformation is defined by the TP as:

Those dimensions of transformation that have to do with the presuppositions, prejudices, attitudes and behaviours and intellectual frameworks that determine institutional processes and practices. These subconscious beliefs and attitudes often advance discrimination in terms of race, socio-economic standing, age, nationality and so forth and form part of the institutional culture. The profound change and renewal of institutional culture is at the heart of qualitative transformation (SU Transformation Plan 2017:6).

So, how will we as a university answer the question posed by the Cape Flats Women’s Association: “what will you do to ensure such a hurtful, racist study never happens again?” I don’t have a great deal of time so I just touch on 3 core recommendations:

1. **Broad-scale institutional Transformation:** The answer is to ensure that attention is paid to qualitative transformation- it demands a recognition that our institutional culture requires profound change. I’m not saying anything new here, but how seriously are we taking the cries of people of colour within this university? This applies both within the broader university and within research itself (the practices, policies and people engaged in research) and not only with regards to research topics. I would like to caution us from “witch hunts” on studies that contain the word race – our material and social realities sadly remain tied to this construct and to ignore it, is to ignore the way in which poverty, inequality and power within systems such as universities are still part of it. Avoiding stigmatizing research topics is one thing, but in this endeavor we need to be anti-racism in our systemic approach – its not in whether we do it, its in how we do it.
2. **Nothing about us without us:** In this case a study was done by white women ON women of colour – with no apparent women of colour on the research team. Here I would like to state “nothing about us without us” is relevant if one not only recognizes racial bias, but wants to avoid the “animals in a zoo” scenario that this study so problematically makes central. It has also bothered me over the past few years to see studies relating to social transformation being done exclusively by white people, with no perspective that even studies on whiteness require engagement with people of colour in South Africa as the very nature of whiteness blinds even researchers to certain perspectives. Does this mean that all research teams need to have a person of colour or woman for the sake of political correctness? No, because this is not about political correctness, it is about the awareness that often those who are most tightly bound to the socio-political-patriarchal power structures are blind to the nuances. The

same goes for ethics committees. Whether or not this study was approved as is by the ethics committee, does not ignore the fact that our committees need to be more representative.

3. **Greater respect and accountability towards research subjects and their communities:** Firstly, we need to see our respondents as subjects and not objects of study. This relates back to seeing research respondents as active subjects with agency and as human beings created with dignity. Many people have asked me: so how is the university going to make restitution to those whose dignity was harmed by the study? I need to point out here that such a study not was not only an assault on individuals who took part in the study, but on the so called broader “coloured community” (and here I do not refer to it as homogenous) itself. Lovelyn Nwadeyi recently made a comment on the study to this effect “research is so personal, it lands on peoples bodies, hearts and minds with the violence that a white supremacist lens would have intended”. I understand the effects on some of our staff after study came to light resulted in deep trauma. This is a question that still needs to be answered and it is one that should give all researchers who work with human subjects pause (including myself) before publishing.

A colleague on the Institutional Transformation Committee recently made the point that “we should not let a good crisis go to waste” – we stand at a fork in the road and I sincerely hope and trust that this so-called crisis will spur us on to seek to create the kind of transformed university environment we can all be proud to be a part of.

#### Bibliography

Cape Flats Women’s Movement. 2019. Maties Researchers do you know how clever you have to be us? Retrieved 3 May 2019. <https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/maties-researchers-do-you-know-how-clever-you-have-to-be-to-be-us-22404666>

Msimang, P. 2018. Non-racialism isn’t in the future of South Africa: towards a pessimistic view of race in South Africa. *Transformation*. 96(2018):48-70

Stellenbosch University Transformation Plan 2017.

Vally, S. & Dalamba, Y. 1999. *Racism, racial integration and desegregation in South African Schools*. Pretoria: Government printers

Wykstra, K. 2017. *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the roots of injustice and privilege*. Illinois:IVP