



Academics have a duty to exercise responsible scholarship

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Academics who indulge in irresponsible scholarship, publish their results and are then called out publicly should not hide under the banner of academic freedom and freedom of scholarship.

The Issue

The issue concerns a professor at the University of Cape Town, Nicoli Nattrass, who published a two page commentary entitled 'Why are black South African students less likely to consider studying biological sciences?' The commentary was published by the South African Journal of Science (SAJS) in its May/June 2020 edition.

Public Reaction

Against Nattrass' commentary

The paper was met with widespread condemnation from diverse quarters on social media. The Black Academic Caucus (BAC) accused Nattrass of publishing research that was offensive to black people and accused her of being racist and publishing the research to further her white supremacist intentions.

Further criticisms were that

- the paper generalised to all black students in South Africa from a non-representative sample of only 114 black students who were opportunistically interviewed at the UCT campus.
- the paper 'was constructed on unexamined assumptions about what black people think, feel, aspire to and are capable of'; and that
- the paper 'had methodological and conceptual flaws that raise questions about the standard and ethics of research at UCT'.

As a result, UCT distanced itself from the content of the paper which it regarded as unethical and racist (not in those words, but the implication was clear) and referred paper to its ethics committee for investigation.

For Nattrass' commentary

There was support for Nattrass as well. The support centred around ideas of academic freedom, political correctness and censorship: apparently, UCT was dangerously close to stifling academic freedom and committing censorship. Further, Nattrass had somehow discovered a 'scientific truth' and this scientific truth was not politically palatable for the majority and hence the outcry. The hurt feelings of the majority could not justify the censoring of a scientific paper that told the truth.

Nattrass' reaction

Nattrass dismissed the allegations and asserted that:

- the paper had been cleared by UCT executives.
- the paper was relevant as it spoke to transformation at the University.
- UCT had caved into pressure from student activists and Black Academic Caucus; and that
- the criticism was also due to her being white.

My considered take

I read the paper and a few things stick out that suggest a flawed and problematic research. Firstly, I notice that her paper is a commentary and according to the guidelines of the South African Journal of Science, commentaries do not require a peer review process. So I can reasonably assume that her 2 pager commentary was not subjected to a peer review process. Perhaps, if this had been done some aspects of her commentary might have been revised.

Now my own personal issues with the commentary.

(1) Transformation is a minefield

Nattrass ought to have exercised additional care in framing her research problem. The framing of the problem as an issue of black agency [Why are black people less likely to study X... <for all intents and purposes you can replace X with anything you like>] will obviously result in prescriptions, speculations and solutions that imply knowledge and assumptions about black people; which assumptions she does not have; and which assumptions no one has.

As an expected consequence, Nattrass wades headlong into a morass of cultural speculations when she posits that the answer to her research problem is intricately tied to cultural factors:

- black people not having experience with the companionship that comes with pet ownership.

- black people having problematic attitudes towards wildlife; and
- black people are driven by materialistic considerations.

But none of these assumptions about black people have been tested before. And if they have, then an appropriate citation would have been helpful to avoid the specific accusation of basing her research on untested assumptions about black people.

Furthermore, from the nature of the title alone (a highly triggered minefield), Nattrass should have anticipated this accusation of unbridled cultural bias and pre-empted it by either making an explicit delimitation comment or by referencing to relevant studies. The consequence of this failure is that Nattrass appears irretrievably mired in cultural bias. And for a researcher this is fatal to the results.

I personally found this unjustified assumption-waving quite problematic — the assumptions were somewhat racist (I am the absolute last to whip out the race card in most situations) and I took some offence. I was born in a family that included five dogs, and grew up with the dogs as pets, companions and protectors. Further, I grew up in the rural areas, in the bush, and was much more in touch with wildlife than almost all suburban white people will ever be, whose physical experience with wild life is typically limited to annual holidays to Kruger National Park, for example.

Most black people I know have similar experiences. So just because black people don't usually jog with their dogs does not suggest that pets are invisible in the black family. And just because most urban black people live in townhouses which have strict rules on pet ownership doesn't mean black people know zilch about pets. And black people in townships have pets too. They may not sleep in the house on the bed but they are there.

Is pet ownership now the next racial frontier? Should I argue that the reason white people are so visibly obsessed with pet ownership as opposed to real world issues is that for them

the ranking order is : (1) them, white people (2) their pets (3) everything else? Is this where the conversation ought to go?

The comment about the unfavourable black attitudes towards wildlife is so nonsensical, I will not spare it any further thought at this stage.

(2) The fact that she is white is a factor in the criticism

OF COURSE! Just as much as my blackness has a lot to do with how I interpret her research — motivations, methodology and results. There is no such thing as a value-free, objective researcher and certainly there is no objective reader too. And for this reason (mostly), transformation is a minefield that needs to be approached with care but not avoided.

I am surprised that Nattrass does not see this. Perhaps she has spent too much time in the ivory towers of academia in Cape Town with its dog running white folk on the sea-point promenade that she is out of touch. Her whiteness is very much a factor in how she frames her problem and in how she interprets her results.

Her comments about pet ownership, attitude towards wildlife is her whiteness talking very loudly. I do not hear the voice of a researcher reviewing her results carefully and dispassionately extrapolating probable causes from her data. Just where is the link between pet ownership and studying biological sciences at university?

The link between owning a pet and studying biological sciences is tenuous at best and is a general non sequitur. Question: if my family does not own a car, am I unlikely to study engineering? Conversely, if my family owns lots of cars, am I likely to study engineering? Playing along with this line of questioning, if in my village the nearest clinic is half a day's walk away, am I unlikely to study medicine?

The fact is pet ownership and attitudes towards wildlife are cultural and value issues and Nattrass should have steered clear of

those and not indulged in problematic speculations as possible solutions worth researching further. As it is she sounds very condescending when she talks about pets, wildlife and black people preferring higher paying jobs (who doesn't? I could do with a higher paying job!).

Further, her being white and studying why black people behave in a certain way and then telling them hey this is what I have found out about you and let me explain it to you is an additional problematic that reeks of white privilege through and through. Why does she, as a white person, feel she has to explicitly study us black people, the choices we make, why we decide what we decide, and why we want what we want out of life?

If, as she says, the study was about transformation at the university then it would have been ideal to approach the subject from an institutional, demand side perspective.

(3) Framing the problem

Transformation issues are institutional and if people behave in a certain way in an environment that lacks transformation, it is because they moderate their behaviours in response to the problematic institutional frameworks. So rather than frame the problem as an issue of black agency rooted in cultural and value issues (high paying job vs the low paying jobs vs love for animals vs pet ownership vs belief in evolution), the research problem would have been more interesting if it had investigated the problem from the demand side.

Nattrass looked at the problem from the supply side: supply of students to the biological sciences department and sought to understand why the quantity of supply is low. From the demand side, we would want to know who are the potential employers for graduates in biological studies? The demographics of these employers, their geographical location, et cetera. What are the requirements for the biological sciences degree programme. What is the throughput at the faculty? How many enrol, how many drop

out and why? These are some of the pertinent institutional questions that arise from a demand side approach to the problem.

In other words, a focus on the institutional aspects has a greater scope for useful insights for solutions than to focus on why black people behave the way they do. Black people are not monolithic but the factors that hold us back are structural and therefore are monolithic in aspect, so why not study those? Nattrass' problem is solely not about the qualitative aspects of enrolment but it is also about student cohort profiles: who completes, who doesn't and why?

Finally, a more effective title would have been along the lines 'why are enrolment figures of black South African students in biological sciences significantly lower than....'. This framing then points to institutions as the starting point of the research. Thus same problem, but different questions and therefore different answers.

Further thoughts

So this is what I find are the serious flaws with Nattrass' commentary.

Let me emphasise that I am all for academic freedom and freedom of scholarship. But these two noble ideas are not a cover for irresponsible scholarship that adds no additional insights to the important topic of transformation. From her commentary, I am not exactly clear what the possible solutions are to increasing black student enrolment in biological sciences. More pet ownership? More holidays at Kruger National Park? Should we start jogging with our dogs? Let them sleep on our beds?

Judging from her publication record, Professor Nattrass seems to be a researcher of considerable productivity and reputation. This time, however, I believe she got it wrong and

should have been a bit more circumspect and given herself time to fully develop her paper, publish it as a journal article rather than as a commentary. This way, her article would have been subjected to the normal, applicable peer review process. Likewise, the editor of the journal should have been cautious enough, given the title of the research alone, to subject the commentary to a peer review process. A long published record does not mean that a researcher's next output is beyond reproach.

To be fair and charitable, Nattrass is onto something with her commentary but unfortunately she is asking the wrong question. For, the problem we want solved is why the throughput of black students, appropriately defined, in the biological sciences is low. Why is it that, say, if 100 black students enrol only 30 graduate with their bachelors and only 5 proceed to postgraduate studies, and yet when 30 white students enrol, 25 graduate with their bachelors and 20 go on to postgraduate studies? I am just assuming for example that this is the fundamental problem.

I am by no means stroking white peoples' egos here and giving them gratuitous props but unfortunately statistics do show that local white students tend to proceed to postgraduate studies in greater proportions than local black students with the result that most black postgraduate students at our universities are from the greater African continent. Incidentally, this is the umbrella problem to which Prof Nattrass' is a sub-problem.

Transformation is an important issue in South Africa and it cannot be that twenty six years into democracy we are still locked in transformation mode. We need to solve these transformation issues and move on to bigger and greater things in the developmental trajectory of the country. Nattrass has an opportunity to contribute to the solution.