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Response to Commentary: 'Why are black South African students less likely to consider studying biological sciences?' (Prof. N Nattrass)

The Commentary 'Why are black South African students less likely to consider studying biological sciences?' offers a mistaken description of a problem which it then addresses through a distressing mixture of poor research methods, ethnocentric concept formation and ahistorical thinking. It instantiates problematic assumptions about students, especially black students, and how they make choices. Its methodological individualism gives rise to inadequate findings that lend themselves to racist interpretations. It fails to contextualise. Its publication as a Commentary in a prestigious journal has enormous implications for the standing of both quantitative and qualitative research in South Africa.

The investigation appears to have assumed that, to address the question of what is presumed to be black under-representation in conservation science 'in South Africa', values – rather than histories and contexts – should be the focus. It assumes that the 'problem' to be solved is student 'choice' (understood via their 'values'), rather than institutional constraints or histories of exclusion. It appears to assume that UCT students can stand as a proxy for 'South African students.' In so doing, it misses both the facts that the disciplines in question have robust enrollments in other universities, and that institutional histories, including of exclusion and discipline-making, matter. Most importantly, it uncritically mobilises ideas that are drawn from and lend themselves to racist thought and to the harm that such thought inflicts.

In investigating 'student choices', the research operationalises a set of ideas about animals and evolution as a proxy for values which are presumed to be cultural, fixed and unchanging. Such an approach, as many commentators have noted, completely overlooks long histories of exclusion – from land as much as tertiary education – of the category of students in question, and long histories of privilege for those whose subject choices and understanding of environmentalism are not in question. Even if exploring 'values' was an adequate approach to the issue in question – which is clearly not the case here – the work fails to understand how values are formed, which and whose values count and why.

The Commentary seems to make a distinct set of presuppositions about the relation between 'starlings', 'evolution', 'apes,' 'pets', 'materialism' and reasons for study, and then racialises the responses. It sets up false dichotomies between social justice and environmental conservation, and between belief and context.

While the author may argue that the terms in question may be proxies for larger schemas, they are drawn from under-examined presuppositions about relations in the world that run the risk of being ethnocentric or worse. Ethnocentrism by knowledge producers in dominant systems, combined with ahistoricism, especially in places strongly shaped by histories of racist thought and practice, runs the risk of producing racist knowledge or of being interpreted as such. This is the case in the commentary in question.

Good scholarship is based on robust method, conscious of its own biases and limitations. It

is directed in its concern for the broader contextual and historical factors that shape current social configurations; alert to how the framing of questions may shape the possibility of harm to others; and particular about understanding power relations in research relations and findings. Neither the Commentary nor the author's responses to critique have demonstrated any of these facets. It is a matter of concern that the Journal has published this study. It authorises poor conceptualisation and investigation as scholarly method. Given their role in identifying research problems and setting research agendas, Commentaries should be subject to extremely critical scrutiny.