

Black scholarship: doing something active and positive about academic racism

Received July 1997; accepted August 1997

This 'article' serves as introduction to the Special Issue: black scholarship. As such, it outlines the various articles contained in, as well as the rationale for the issue. In this article the authors argue that programmatic anti-racist interventions such as this Special Issue are crucial to the process of redressing the 'racialised' patterns of research and authorship characterising mainstream psychology journals.

[*] To whom correspondence should be addressed

The ways in which scholars may choose to maintain their critical function in society are fraught with contradictions, ambiguities, uncertainties, and perhaps even trepidation. It is therefore not surprising that the Editorial Collective members of this Special Issue constantly raised questions about, and vigorously debated the tone, texture, scope and content of this editorial: How should the editorial be framed? Is it not too strident and alienating? Should it not adopt a strong celebratory tone focusing on the resilience of black academics - women and men? Why are we even focusing our attention on such issues? Would the advocates of exclusionary academic practices in any event not seek to devalue initiatives such as this Special Issue- irrespective of its content and how it is framed? Such questions are perhaps best studied within the context of psychology's history.

According to Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (1994) the history of psychology is inextricably linked to the ideology of racism. Psychology, as these authors and several others (e.g. Bulhan, 1993; Cooper, Nicholas, Seedat & Statman, 1990; Foster, 1993) have argued, has played a central role in the reproduction of racism; and racism, in turn, has had a profound impact on the functioning and productions of psychology as discipline. In South Africa, this nexus is illustrated most saliently in the 'racialised' patterns of research and authorship which have been historically reflected in the various journals linked to the discipline. For example, according to research conducted by Seedat (1990) more than 75% of the articles published in the South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP) during the four preceding decades were penned by white South Africans. Less than 25% of these articles were written by black South African scholars and authors from other countries. In instances where articles were written by multiple authors, blacks were the most under-represented group in the positions of first (3.8%), third (2.3%) and fourth authors (6.7%). They

were placed second lowest (4.1%) in the position of second author, with non-South African authors fairsing worst in this position.

The disparity between the contributions of black and white South African authors to the SAJP (and to most other 'mainstream' scholarly journals), and the concomitant uneven relations of power in academia, echo the specific socio-political arrangements that characterised South African society during the period covered by Seedat's (1990) study. More specifically, it illustrates the influence of racism on psychology, as well as psychology's complicity in the reproduction of this ideology.

Discourses of science, method and standards have often been used to rationalise the inequalities in research and authorship patterns (Essed, 1987; Seedat, 1990). Such discourses were used to distance editorial boards from the responsibility of owning and challenging racist practices in knowledge production and dissemination. Hence, it was frequently argued that if at all the trends in favour of white men were racialised, these could be satisfactorily explained by the 'inadequate' training of blacks, their 'difficulties' with rational argument, and so forth. There has not been any acknowledgement that these practices in the publication arena were in direct collusion with broader discriminatory practices which sought to keep blacks out of the highest levels of academia. One of the major consequences of these practices was that blacks were rendered 'voiceless' in mainstream journals. Instead, their voices were largely heard outside the formal structures of academia- in political rallies, symposia, popular literature, etc. We wish to argue that, by 'not speaking out' (Durheim, this issue) and by 'looking the other way' (Cooper et al., 1990, p. 2) when they should have dealt with the consequences of racism within the discipline/profession, organised psychology allowed itself to become part of the racist status quo in this country.

There are many who, perhaps naively, expected the political and social changes introduced by the first democratically-elected government in this country in 1994 to be reflected in a radical 'deracialisation' of academia in general, and social science journals in particular. However, a perfunctory scrutiny of the issues of the SAJP published subsequent to the completion of Seedat's study reveals that the publishing trends established during the pre-1994 period appear to be continuing virtually unaltered (MacGregor, 1997; Seedat, this issue). As Howitt and OwusuBempah (1994) observe, racism is not something of the past; it is an integral aspect of our present:

There are remarkable continuities in the racism of psychology which span much of the discipline's history and present. If nothing active and positive is done about it, racism will continue to alienate psychology from much of its subject matter. It is dangerous to believe that racism is a thing of psychology's early years, irrelevant to its present (p. 1).

As was evident from the deliberations at a recent workshop examining the obstacles to scholarship at historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) [1], the reasons for the enduring 'racialised' patterns of research and authorship in South African psychology are manifold. The most frequently reported and pertinent of these reasons will briefly be mentioned here. Firstly, as was reported by Simbayi (1997), the overwhelming majority of black social scientists are currently employed at HDIs where most of their time is consumed by teaching unmanageably large numbers of students, at the expense of research and authorship activities. This predicament is compounded by an acute shortage of adequate research facilities and research funds at these institutions. Furthermore, as a result of past apartheid practices, blacks are only now entering academia in significant numbers. While this trend is obviously to be welcomed, it also means that large numbers of social scientists at HDIs are relatively young, frequently with little experience in research and writing activities, and with few senior black scholars to serve as models and mentors.

In a study recently conducted by Van Niekerk, Diedricks, de la Rey, Shefer and Duncan (in press), several black psychologists were interviewed regarding the gross under-representation of black scholars in the world of publishing. Most of them attributed the problem to structural obstacles and the lack of support available to black scholars interested in publishing. As two of the interviewees put it, 'psychology is still run by a group of established white academics' (p. 11) who are 'not going to support us in reaching our objectives [in regard to research and publications] because that is threatening to their position in academia' (p. 9). Another psychologist remarked that prevailing attitudes towards black scholars make it difficult for many to find a role for themselves in academic writing. Consequently, in a number of cases, attempts to write are often countermined by a debilitating sense of impotence and fear of failure.

The van Niekerk et al. (in press) study suggests that the abovementioned perceptions appear to be relatively widespread among black academics. In fact, it was largely on the basis of these perceptions, as well as the realisation that the continued marginalisation of blacks in regard to

research and publishing would not change significantly unless black scholars themselves do something about their situation, that the Forum for Black Research and Authorship Development (hereafter referred to as the Forum) was established in mid-1995.

The Forum was established at a meeting organised by a group of black psychologists from the University of the Western Cape. The primary objective of the Forum was to strive towards increasing research and authorship initiatives by black scholars through:

- (1) launching projects to challenge the unfavourable structural conditions that militate against greater productivity among black scholars in terms of research and publications; and
- (2) establishing a regional support network to offer the necessary assistance to these scholars to increase their research and publications output.

Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (1994) argue that the legacy of racism in psychology can best be dealt with by means of programmatic anti-racist interventions, i.e. interventions aimed at doing something 'active and positive ... about ... racism' (p. 1) in psychology. Those involved in the establishment of the Forum considered it as one such intervention.

A large number of practitioners, academics and senior psychology students attended the first Forum meeting. The attempt to draw as many people as possible into the Forum appeared to have been important for its legitimacy, as well as the projects that it would undertake. Since its establishment, the Forum has initiated several projects, one of the more notable being a textbook writing project. A product of this initiative, reviewed in this issue, namely, *Contemporary issues in human development: a South African focus*, has just been published. Another textbook is currently in progress. In addition, at the beginning of last year, the Forum was approached by the Editor of the SAJP to guest edit a special issue of the journal on black scholarship (the current issue). Within the Forum, the SAJP proposal was met with a combination of enthusiasm, scepticism and ambivalence. Consequently, it was debated vociferously before a response was eventually formulated. It is on this debate that we wish to briefly reflect here.

We deliberated at length about the merits and limitations of the proposed Special Issue. While there was no doubt about the need to redress the disparities in publication, whether the Special Issue was an appropriate means to do so was a point of contention. Many participants expressed reservations out of a fear that this Special Issue would achieve nothing beyond a 'ghettoization' of black scholarship. Others questioned the meaning of the construct 'black scholarship'. Some of the participants saw the SAJP invitation as an opportunity to further the objectives of the Forum. The Special Issue could provide a national focus on the current state of black scholarship in this country. It could also serve as a platform from which to highlight and challenge the obstacles which have continued to undermine black authorship in the social sciences. Moreover, some argued, this Special Issue could serve as a means to setting up a national structure along the lines of the Forum to offer meaningful support for black authors, and particularly beginner authors. It was also suggested that this structure should ideally continue operating after the publication of the Special Issue indeed, until existing authorship trends are redressed.

In the end, it was decided to respond to the SAJP proposal by reformulating it in ways that would fit with the broader objectives of the Forum. Firstly, we would use the Special Issue to extend the network of the Forum through inviting representatives from as many regions as possible to serve on the Editorial Collective of the Special Issue. One of primary tasks which the Editorial Collective members consequently set for themselves at their first meeting was to facilitate the establishment of similar support structures in other regions - with the aim of ultimately setting up a national support structure for authors. Secondly, we would use the Special Issue to examine the ways in which journals may function differently to empower new authors and to become more inclusive in their operation by, for example, extending the range of reviewers and making use of editorial collectives rather than single editors. Finally, we would use the Special Issue to explore other channels of working to change the inequities in research and authorship in psychology in South Africa.

At this point it might be apposite to briefly consider the responses of non-Forum members to the concept of a Special Issue on black scholarship. As had been the case within the Forum, the general response in academia at large to the notion of a Special Issue dealing with black scholarship was mixed. Some saw this initiative as an opportunity to deal with the problem of the under-representation of black scholars in the sphere of research and authorship in an 'active and positive manner' (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994, p.1). Others viewed this initiative with indifference, hostility and outright antagonism. This was not surprising.

It has often been the experience of black academics in this country that when the notion of scholarship is associated with the term 'black', it frequently provokes 'fervent accusations of 'racism'. Alternatively, it is often dismissed out of hand on the basis of the (unfortunately still widely held assumption) that no scholarly project is worthy of being taken seriously if it does not involve, or enjoy the tacit endorsement of the existing intellectual elite, whom Saths Cooper (personal communication) refers to as the intellectual class of 'zamindars'. Frequently, the actions and discourses of this group have as consequence that initiatives defined by blacks for and on behalf of blacks, are devalued, diminished and demobilised. Trivial and degrading criticisms, masked in the language of science constantly expose this elite's lack of commitment to the elimination of racism in psychology. One of the people interviewed in van Niekerk et al.'s (in press) study commented, 'We have to deal with ... a lot of criticisms, a whole lot of them not valid.' Another remarked that the criticism directed at blacks embarking on capacity building initiatives aimed at developing black scholarship in general, and authorship in particular, comes primarily from established academic elites at historically white universities who, in the past, had no reservations about contributing to publications that represented the views of only the white minority (Cooper et al., 1993).

Perhaps an explanation for the extreme opposition to initiatives such as the Special Issue can be found in Howitt and Owusu-Bempah's (1994) observation that 'any programme to challenge established ways will be resisted tooth and nail, by some, especially those with a vested interest in [the status quo]' (p. 181).

Among the more insidious responses to the Special Issue that the Editorial Collective encountered was the indifference of certain academics who appear to remain enslaved by outdated ideologies and academic ideals, and who then parade their enslavement as independent thought and a quest for academic excellence. Instead of involving themselves in initiatives aimed at undoing existing patterns of domination in academia, this group of intellectuals, whom Bulhan (1985) dismissively refers to as 'factors', together with the zamindars, appear to enjoy intellectual controversy for ideologically suspect reasons that keep alive debates on subjects that do not warrant serious intellectual enquiry and energy. In the main, these debates have often simply served to bolster or justify the ideas and systems that inferiorise and objectify black experience, and to detract from the problems of racism still confronting psychology.

Although in this editorial we have presented various debates concerning the Special Issue, it must be stated unequivocally that we do so merely in the interest of transparency. We believe that the idea of black scholarship does not warrant justification nor apologies. This Special Issue of the South African Journal of Psychology is integral to a black scholarship project, a project which endeavours to address the legacy of racism in academia in which organised psychology played no small part (Seedat, this issue).

In putting this Special Issue together, the Editorial Collective extensively debated the often unexamined and unquestioned procedures of social science, such as existing systems of peer review, which in many mainstream journals are often misused to bolster the pretensions and political interests of academic elites. Furthermore, we examined the place and value of academic jargon, which may have merit in that it allows for parsimonious communication among academics themselves, but certainly distances the people 'whom we seek to serve' from intellectual activity; resulting in knowledge production remaining the exclusive purview and privilege of an educated elite.

Following an exhaustive debate on the issue, it was decided that each contribution submitted to us for publication would be sent to a minimum of two reviewers, with at least one of them being black, and another an established author. The rationale for this was linked to our belief that strategies to correct existing imbalances in the world of publishing should not be limited to authorship, but to the entire publishing system, including reviewing processes. For a very long time in South African academia, the majority of academics approached to review submissions to mainstream journals came from the ranks of established authors at historically white institutions. With the exception of a handful of established black authors, relatively few black academics were approached for this purpose. This situation obviously has to change, not only for the sake of 'representivity', but also because black reviewers are more likely to be familiar with the obstacles typically confronting black authors and are therefore inordinately well placed to offer the necessary support and guidance to the latter in their attempts to gain entry into the world of publishing. It is the view of the Editorial Collective that, particularly during this period of transforming the imbalances in the processes of knowledge production and dissemination in our discipline, the review process should include offers and opportunities of support, guidance and assistance to aspirant or developing authors, rather than being the 'gatekeeping' exercise that it frequently turns out to be.

While the Special Issue was partly conceptualised as a means to facilitate the publication of work by aspirant and first-time black authors, the reviewers approached for this issue were reminded that the accepted publication requirements for social scientific journals had to be adhered to. Broadly defined, these include that submissions had to contribute to knowledge in the discipline, adhere to acceptable standards of literary expression, and that material had to be coherently structured. While adhering to these guidelines, most of the reviewers of the articles included in this issue did so with a commendable sensitivity to the needs of contributing authors.

In addition to the reviewers' recommendations, the following two criteria, related to the capacity building objectives of the Forum and the Special Issue, were utilised to determine which articles would be included in the Special Issue. First, we decided that preference would be given to articles authored by beginner authors. Secondly, in cases where the articles submitted for publication were written by multiple authors, preference would be given to articles with black authors represented in the 'first author' position.

Based on the above criteria, as well as recommendations-of our reviewers, the papers listed below were selected by the Editorial Collective for inclusion in this Special Issue. Firstly, however, it has to be noted that the response to the call for articles for the Special Issue exceeded our expectations. We received several international enquiries about the issue, and more than thirty submissions of a particularly high standard (perhaps this can be seen as a reflection of the need for an issue of this nature). Unfortunately, due to space constraints, not all the articles that met our requirements, could be included in the Special Issue. However, in keeping with our belief that the Special Issue project should not be a one-off intervention, arrangements have been made to have these articles published in subsequent issues of the SAJP.

In the first article, which is particularly relevant to the overall theme of this Special Issue, Durheim and Mokeki examine the ways in which 'race' related issues have typically been dealt with in articles published in the SAJP during the period 1970 to 1995. Based on their research, the authors conclude that the SAJP can perhaps be accused of having succumbed to racist ideological forces operative in South African psychology.

The second article, written by Suffla, reports on a study which explored a group of black women's experiences of illegal abortion. While the study was conducted before the implementation of the Choice Termination of Pregnancy Act, which revoked the restrictions of previous abortion legislation, its findings remain relevant and extremely important.

Using a women-centred perspective, Parekh and de la Rey's article explores ten black adolescents' experiences of unplanned motherhood. Like Suffla's study, Parekh and de la Rey's study was conducted within a qualitative framework.

Sexual harassment is the topic of the next article by Mayekiso and Bhana. The article is based on a study which investigated black students' perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment at the University of Transkei. The study found that various forms of sexual harassment were prevalent.

Letlaka-Rennert, Luswazi, Helms and Zea's article explores the reactions of a group of university-based students to gender oppression. Using Helms's Womanist Identity Model, this article argues that gender oppression differentially influences black women's functioning in various psychological domains.

May and Spangenberg's article examines the relationship between sex-role orientation and coping ability in men with a managerial orientation.

The article on identity development, by Stevens and Lockhat provides a stimulating theoretical exploration of how black adolescents may currently be attempting to negotiate the changing socio-historical contexts of post-apartheid South Africa. On reading this article, one realises how under-explored the area of adolescent identity development in contemporary South Africa is. Perhaps this article, as well as the following article by Moosa and Moonsamy will serve as impetus for more theoretical papers and empirical research in this area.

Using Bulhan's theory of 'cultural in-betweenity', Moosa and Moonsamy examine patterns of identification among black students at a historically white university. Though it is based on a study conducted in 1989, the article remains informative and relevant. The authors' insightful interpretation and application of Bulhan's theory is echoed in various other articles contained in this Special Issue.

In his article, Seedat tackles the daunting and complex issue of liberatory psychology. In the words of the author himself, this article 'seeks to describe the distinctive processes phases and epistemological challenges integral to the quest for a liberatory attempts to offer meaningful guidance of those committed to the development of a different, more relevant psychology, make it a fitting concluding article to the main section of the Special Issue.

The theoretical and empirical articles are followed by a short-communication by Gobodo-Madikizela on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Hopefully, this communication will serve as impetus for more research in an important area which has been somewhat neglected by psychologists.

The final contributions to this Special Issue are two book reviews by Nicholas and Rataemane, both dealing with issues pertinent to the overall focus of the issue.

By way of conclusion, we wish to thank all the reviewers and Forum members involved in this Special Issue. Without their support and guidance this initiative would certainly not have come to fruition. Most importantly, however, we wish to acknowledge and commend the patience and intellectual tenacity of all the contributors to the Special Issue, among whom are those whose work will appear in the SAJP for the first time. They have contributed to the making of history - in the sense that they have contributed to an issue of SAJP in which the majority of start of an irrevocable process of transforming the uneven relations of power in the world of academic authorship.

Note

1. This workshop was held at the 1996 Annual Congress of the Psychological Society of South Africa (Psy SSA) and reported on by Simbayi (1997) at the 1997 PsySSA Western Cape Regional Conference.

References

Bulhan, H. A. (1993). Imperialism and studies of the psyche: a critique of African psychological research (1-34). In L.J. Nicholas (Ed.), *Psychology and oppression: critiques and proposals*. Johannesburg: Skottaville Publishers.

Bulham, H. A. (1985). *Franz Fanon and the psychology of oppression*. New York: Plenum Press.

Cooper, S., Nicholas, L.J., Seedat, M. & Statman, J.M. (1990). *Psychology and apartheid: the struggle for psychology in South Africa* (1-21). In L.J. Nicholas & S. Cooper (Eds), *Psychology and apartheid*. Johannesburg: Vision/Madiba Publications.

Essed, P. (1987). *Academic racism*. Amsterdam: CRES Publications series.

Foster, D. (1993). On racism: virulent mythologies and fragile threads (55-80). In L.J. Nicholas (Ed.), *Psychology and oppression: critiques and proposals*. Johannesburg: Skottaville Publishers.

Howitt, D. & Owusu-Bempah, J. (1994). *The racism of psychology. Time for change*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Mas Gregor, K. (1997, August 3). Plans for black universities to rise above their second-class legacy. *The Sunday Independent*, 6.

Miles, R. (1989). *Racism*. London: Routledge. Seedat, M. (1990). Programmes, trends and silences in South African psychology, (23-49). In L.J. Nicholas & S. Cooper (Eds), *Psychology and apartheid*. Johannesburg: Vision/Madiba Publications.

Simbayi, L.C. (1997). Challenges and difficulties of psychology departments at historically black universities concerning research and scholarship. Paper presented at the PsySSA Western Cape regional Conference, 'Psychology in a Changing South Africa', University of the Western Cape, Bellville, 19 April.

Van Niekerk, A, Diedricks, M., de la Rey, C., Shefer, T. & Duncan, N. (in press). Shifting the publications game: the case of a textbook project at a historically black university. *Perspectives in Education*.

~~~~~

By N. Duncan Department of Psychology, 'University of Venda, Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandou 0920, South Africa; M. Seedat, Centre for Peace Action, UNISA, Johannesburg, South Africa; A.

van Niekerk, Department of Psychology, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa; C. de la Rey, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa; P. Gobodo-Madikizela, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Cape Town; L.C. Simbayi, Department of Psychology, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa and A. Bhana Department of Psychology, University of Durban-Westville, Durban, South Africa

---

Copyright of South African Journal of Psychology is the property of South African Journal of Psychology and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.