

How controversial "racist" research opens door for a decolonisation drive

There has been justified outrage about a recently published - and [hastily retracted](#) - [academic article](#) written by academics from Stellenbosch University in South Africa.



Historically, Khoisan people from southern Africa were used as scientific subjects in racist experiments. hecke61/Shutterstock

The article suggested that “coloured” women in South Africa “present with low cognitive function and which is significantly influenced by education”. Coloured is a racial classification legalised during apartheid for people of “mixed race”. This allegedly low cognition was also linked to unhealthy lifestyle behaviours.

A myriad of articles have been written that criticise the authors’ work, and [take aim](#) at their university’s ethics committee for allowing the study to be conducted. They have been accused of racial essentialism; of [methodological flaws](#); and of [connecting race with medical conditions](#).

There’s one particularly important concept that’s been given a lot of attention in the debates – the notion of [“race science”](#), which is also called scientific racism. The article and the opprobrium that followed are a reminder that race and racism are still deeply embedded in science, and must be exorcised.

This can only be achieved by decolonising modern western science. By “decolonise”, I mean “decentre” rather than destroy modern western science. It must be stripped of the epistemological and methodological privileges it enjoys. It must be [placed on the same plane](#) as other approaches to knowledge and research. In this way, it can be compared equitably with other ways of knowing.

If this approach becomes commonplace, then new knowledge spaces will be created. In these spaces, those from different knowledge traditions can produce new knowledge through the negotiation of trust. They can apply different lenses and ask different questions that won’t lead them to racialised ways of thinking and operating. But, this will require a willingness to accept that modern western science is one way and not the only way of understanding the natural world.

Over the years progress has been made to excise racism from science or to compensate those who were victims of scientific racism. One example is the compensation of the families of the African American men who were denied diagnosis and treatment for syphilis in the well-known [Tuskegee study](#). Another is the universal acceptance of the principle in ethics that states [“do no harm”](#). However, this has not arrested enduring racism in science.

Race science rising

Race science concerns the use of science as a vehicle to advance racist agendas, or where race is used as a variable in science for the purpose of labelling certain groups of people negatively or defining them in deficit terms.

There are many examples of this in history. Carolus Linnaeus, who developed the modern system of classifying living things, classified Khoisan (first nations people of southern Africa) as [*Homo monstrosus*](#): monstrous or abnormal people. And [in 1937](#), scientists in the Zoology Department at Stellenbosch University used 80 measurements to confirm the category “coloured man” as distinctive from “white man”.

British science journalist Angela Saini [points out](#) that race science is on the rise again internationally. And, she argues, it’s being advanced in subtle ways by well-educated people who wear smart suits. This includes academics at leading universities around the world.

It’s important to be alive to the dangers of race science because it can be used to justify racism in broader society.

But it continues to exist because it is part of a system of thought that I call modern western science. I’m referring here to science embedded in Eurocentrism: a way of thinking that prioritised anything from the western world – and particularly from Europe – and that was [spread and entrenched through colonisation](#).

Given its original site of production, this school of thought necessarily centres European history. Through its various incarnations, an ideal identity of human was formed that is male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied – and this is a screen against which others are declared different. Positing others as “different” (and inferior) opened the door to race science.

A new approach

Of course, modern western science did not develop free from the influence of other knowledges. Through colonising places, it picked up certain ideas and approaches from different countries or regions. For example, Indigenous peoples in North America helped settlers to treat life-threatening scurvy through the application of tonics made from conifer needles, which were rich in Vitamin C.

Read more:

[*How Indigenous knowledge advances modern science and technology*](#)

However, such knowledges were absorbed into a western cultural archive and represented in western terms. For example, the pain-reliever Aspirin was first discovered by Indigenous people – they used [willow bark](#), which contains the active ingredient from which Aspirin was created. More importantly, modern western science has not paid homage to the influence of other knowledge systems.

There is no denying that modern western science has brought some benefits to humanity. But this does not mean it

shouldn't be interrogated and, as I suggested earlier, de-centred. The upshot of this would be the democratisation of science in two ways. First, by broadening who participates in the production of scientific knowledge; and second, by broadening what counts as science. This would help to root out race science.

Science has always been and will always remain the product of human will and intention. Scientific knowledge will always be culturally and historically produced. And if we are to speak in any sense about objectivity in science, this must be produced by science that is multicultural and not universal.

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