



## **#BlackLivesMatter, even in research: A call to researchers to take a knee**

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South Africa, the United States, and the world are facing a new revolution, one that seeks to bring to the fore the plight of African people who have endured years of racism, slavery and unfair discrimination. In the United States, the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement has been at the forefront of voices that have raised concerns about the killing of African Americans in what is perceived as racially motivated killings. Recently, a wave of anti-racism protests spread around the world following the death of George Floyd. 'Taking a knee' has subsequently become a global symbolic gesture against racism. This gesture is associated with Martin Luther King Jr, who 'took the knee' to pray with anti-racism protesters in Selma, Alabama, in 1965<sup>1,2</sup>.

In 2015, South African students across the nation participated in *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* protests<sup>3,4</sup>. In these protests, students demanded, among other things, the removal of Cecil Rhodes' statue from a university campus and the Africanization of the curriculum. Hlophe<sup>5(p1)</sup> argues that the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* protests were actually about a need to 'close the gap between post-apartheid South Africa's principles and its reality.' As a consequence of these protests, interest in studies exploring strategies for decolonizing the curriculum has grown rapidly. In fact, 'it is not uncommon to hear speakers refer, almost casually, to the need to 'decolonize our schools,' or use 'decolonizing methods,' or 'decolonize student thinking.'<sup>6(p2)</sup>

However, missing in these discourses is the need to decolonize research. It would appear as though *#BlackLivesMatter* is only reserved for socio-political spaces. This apparent disconnection of science from socio-political issues is well captured by Hodson<sup>7(p2)</sup> who posits that 'regrettably, science is often portrayed as the de-personalized and disinterested pursuit of objective truth, independent of the society in which it is practiced and untouched by ordinary human emotions, values, and conventions.' However, García and Sharif<sup>8</sup> warn that racism may manifest through institutional policies and societal norms, and calls for research that is based on principles of social justice.

### **Racial undertones in research**

In the South African context, racism and decolonization are emotive subjects given the colonial and apartheid history of the country. Nevertheless, despite this, recent research publications have raised concerns in the media regarding the extent to which researchers are sensitive to issues of racism. For example, Nattrass<sup>9(p1)</sup> published a commentary that sought to provide an insight into 'why do conservation biology, zoology, and the other biological sciences subjects struggle to attract black South African

students?’ In this controversial paper, from which her institution, distanced itself<sup>10</sup>, Natrass<sup>9(p1)</sup> suggests that ‘materialist values and aspirations (pertaining to occupation and income) as well as experience with pets and attitudes towards wildlife’ may be the reason why Black students are less likely to consider studying biological sciences. Referring to the *#RhodesMustfall* and *#FeesMustFall* protests as the ‘Fallists’ protests’, she argues that ‘Given the ‘Fallist’ protests of 2015/2016, another possibility is that wildlife conservation itself might be regarded as colonial, and students might perceive a trade-off between social justice and conservation’<sup>9(p1)</sup>. De Villiers<sup>10(p1)</sup> reports that Natrass’ institution has since launched an investigation into ‘methodological and conceptual flaws’ in Natrass’ publication, which apparently is ‘constructed on unexamined assumptions about what black people think, feel, aspire to, and are capable of’.

A similarly controversial paper was published in 2019, where Nieuwoudt et al. sought to assess ‘the cognitive function and its association with age and education in a sample of young and middle-aged Colored South African women’<sup>11</sup>. These scholars made the following claims:

- ‘The Colored community is, in terms of social class, considered the most homogenous group in South Africa and are generally described as a poor, lower working-class community’.<sup>(p1)</sup>
- Cognitive performance is impacted by several factors, including... sex, educational attainment, and ethnicity’<sup>(p2)</sup>.
- Previous research has ‘revealed lower cognitive function scores, particularly in Black African and Colored participants’<sup>(p2)</sup>
- Previous research has shown that ‘Colored and Black African older adults achieved worse cognitive scores than White and Indian/Asian older adults’<sup>(p10)</sup>.
- ‘Having higher education, being White or Indian/Asian, increased wealth, being married and in good health was

associated with improved cognitive functioning’<sup>(p10)</sup>.

The researchers<sup>11(p3)</sup> state that ‘all participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study and gave written consent to participate.’ However, this is the same argument that is often submitted by the beneficiaries of Colonial settlers, who argue, to this day, that colonisation was constitutional and legal, and therefore Colonial settler beneficiaries should not return the land to the indigenous people<sup>12</sup>. Following a global outcry about its underlying racial undertone, Nieuwoudt et al.’s<sup>11</sup> paper was retracted by the journal editors.

It is noteworthy that even Dr. James D. Watson, who is heralded as a pioneer in modern genetics for his work on DNA, was called to order following his ‘unsubstantiated and reckless personal opinions’<sup>13(p1)</sup>, which suggested that Blacks were intellectually inferior to Whites<sup>14</sup>. Watson, who later apologized, had stated that he was ‘inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa’ because ‘all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours, whereas all the testing says, not really’<sup>15(p1)</sup>. Responding to these comments, the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory stated that ‘Dr. Watson’s statements are reprehensible, unsupported by science, and in no way represent the views of CSHL, its trustees, faculty, staff, or students. The Laboratory condemns the misuse of science to justify prejudice’<sup>13(p1)</sup>.

Asongu and Kodila-Tedika also published a controversial paper, in which they ‘postulate and justify a hypothesis that countries which are endowed with higher cognitive ability are more likely to experience lower levels of slave exports probably due to relatively better abilities to organize, corporate, oversee and confront slave vendors’<sup>16(p13)</sup>. These researchers further state that their ‘study has assumed that most types of intelligences are captured by the IQ. Hence, the reasoning-orientation and ‘problem-solving’ inclination underlying the IQ can be leveraged to avoid capture during slave trade’<sup>16(p14)</sup>.

### Sugar-coating decolonization

In light of the examples above, I argue that while the interest in *#BlackLivesMatter*, *#RhodesMustFall*, *#FeesMustFall*, and decolonization of the curriculum is welcomed, researchers should not ignore the complexity of racism and the concept of decolonization. As such, scholars need not be naïve to the sugar-coated narrative given to the concept of decolonization. Tuck and Yang<sup>6(p2)</sup> caution against ‘the ease with which the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, supplanting prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decenter settler perspectives.’ Tuck and Yang<sup>6(p2)</sup> further argue that ‘settler scholars swap out prior civil and human rights-based terms, seemingly to signal both an awareness of the significance of Indigenous and decolonizing theorizations of schooling and educational research, and to include Indigenous peoples on the list of considerations - as an additional special (ethnic) group or class.’

Winberg and Winberg<sup>17(p248)</sup> suggest that ‘the process of decolonization does not reject established fundamental knowledge as the perversions of Euro-centric thought but rather looks at the nature of the curriculum and critically engages in establishing potentially different approaches to the way this knowledge is produced or applied, looking at the process of learning as a whole.’ This view goes against Tuck, and Yang<sup>6(p2)</sup> who state that ‘decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation’. This settler appropriation is evident in that some scholars suggest that ‘educators involved in the decolonization of a curriculum should thus be mindful of implementing changes that would lead to improvement, not to degrading, the resultant curriculum’<sup>17(p248)</sup>. In line with

Tuck and Yang's<sup>6</sup> views, I argue that decolonization cannot and should not be domesticated as an ‘improvement’ of a colonized curriculum, including colonized institutions of higher learning. Instead, it should be about deconstructing the colonized curriculum and reconstructing a new decolonized curriculum, one informed by research that is based on social justice principles.

In 2003, Nelson Mandela, a South African liberation hero, argued that ‘education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world’<sup>18</sup>. In line with this, the South African education system has already undergone various curriculum reforms<sup>19,20</sup>. Underlying these reforms has been the need to introduce a decolonized curriculum that fosters citizenship. Citizenship education suggests that education should aim to educate children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who participate in the reconstruction and empowerment of the society<sup>21</sup>. If citizenship education is to be realized, research and curriculum designers should acknowledge and eliminate pseudo-science, which is perpetuating the narration that one race is superior to another.

According to Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández<sup>22</sup>, settler colonialism as a process rather than an event refers to the formation of colonies where the colonizer makes himself the arbiter of citizenship, civility, and knowing. This means decolonization of the curriculum and research would require the restoration of citizenship, civility, and knowledge back to the indigenous people. This is because colonization partly sought to ‘invent man’ through pseudo-science that justified the destruction of indigenous life and knowledge systems. This was done partly through a curriculum that adopted ‘fort pedagogy’ which is characterized by ‘an insistence that everyone must be brought inside and become like the insiders, or they will be eliminated. The fort teaches us that outsiders must be either incorporated or excluded, in order for development to occur in the desired

ways'<sup>23(p44)</sup>. The *#BlackLivesMatter*, *#RhodesMustFall*, and *#FeesMustFall* activists are partly fighting against this 'fort pedagogy' in which African people are treated differently to others. Sadly, some research seems to promote this 'fort pedagogy' by implying that Black people are not equal to others.

### Conclusion

In light of the recent anti-racism developments, therefore, I believe that institutions of higher education, including researchers, should 'take a knee' and reflect on their perceptions of racism and social justice. Researchers, including editors and reviewers, must ask themselves:

- To what extent do their research embrace social justice?
- To what extent are institutions of research using fort pedagogy, which systematically promotes the exclusion of others?

In responding to these questions, researchers cannot afford to sugar-coat the concept of decolonization, by continuing to produce research that is seen to imply that one race is better than another. It is time for researchers to take a knee, because black lives matter, even in research.

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