



Intellectual laziness and academic dishonesty: A threat to academic freedom?

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The National Plan on Higher Education¹ released in 2001 states that:

The value and importance of research cannot be over-emphasised. Research, in all its forms and functions, is perhaps the most powerful vehicle that we have to deepen our democracy. Research engenders the values of inquiry, critical thinking, creativity and open-mindedness, which are fundamental to building a strong, democratic ethos in society.

Academic freedom matters; it matters a great deal. It is a sine qua non for the success of our science system. When scientists invoke academic freedom whenever they are expected to account, then this poses a threat to academic freedom. It is a perversion of the principle of academic freedom, when it appears to be equated to 'free speech when exercised by scientists', irrespective of whether what the scientist says is informed by expert knowledge or is informed by the findings of rigorous academic research. Academic freedom goes considerably beyond free speech. Amongst other things, academic freedom means that scientists have the freedom not to be hindered in their pursuit of 'truth', in an attempt to push back the boundaries of knowledge, and that they have the freedom to disseminate their findings without fear of victimisation. This freedom comes with responsibility and society must hold scientists to higher levels of ethical conduct of research, of accuracy and truthfulness in their reporting. When they appear to fall short, society has an obligation to hold them to account. Scientists pose a threat to academic freedom when they (ab)use academic freedom as both a spear and a shield: a spear used to attack and a shield behind which they hide when expected to explain themselves.

It is disingenuous to give the public the impression that academic freedom is unfettered; otherwise any rabid racist, or misogynist, or antisemite would have a convenient defence, as long as they claimed to base their utterings on 'research'. Denigrating people under the cloak of academic freedom is not and cannot be acceptable. This would undermine academic freedom. Instead, it would strengthen confidence in the academic endeavour when the public is made aware that there are strict protocols and policies to ensure that academic freedom is not abused. For example, research proposals involving humans or involving animals have to be scrutinised by Research Ethics Committees. It is often a requirement that consent is sought from those that will be subjects of an inquiry. Where there are allegations that these protocols may not have been observed, then it is obligatory for a university to investigate possible violations. This is one of the responsibilities of any Senior Executive responsible for the Research Portfolio within a university. We should also bear in mind that members of a university executive are themselves often active researchers; or they have come through the academic ranks.

One would assume that they do not give up their freedom to express their views on academic matters simply because they are members of the Executive. It is intellectually lazy for those who 'speak truth to power', to often portray those in authority as censorious, when in fact they may be holding scientists to account in order to protect the integrity of the academic project. It is troubling that people who know better, would appear to give the impression that Executives of universities or Boards of Science Councils would go on a fishing expedition or witch-hunt and conduct investigations outside of accepted institutional policies and procedures. Most importantly, all South African citizens enjoy protection under the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act 3 of 2000, which was promulgated

To give effect to the right to administrative action that is lawful, reasonable and procedurally fair and to the right to written reasons for administrative action as contemplated in section 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996; and to give matters incidental thereto.

Investigations of academic misconduct are often conducted by independent committees of a researcher's peers; otherwise the credibility of the findings would be questioned. We find it troubling that an impression would be created that such investigations are uncommon and are conducted or influenced by university executives.

The commentary by Professor Nicoli Natrass in the South African Journal of Science, and some of the responses to it, provides some examples of these troubling tendencies.

- (a) Does an 'opportunistic survey' require ethics clearance? If it does, did she obtain such clearance? It would be troubling if an 'opportunistic survey' does not require ethical clearance.
- (b) Did the 'subjects' give their consent? Do they need to give their consent in an 'opportunistic survey'? It would be troubling if 'opportunistic surveys' do not require consent by those involved. This would be open to abuse.

- (c) Was the sample size big enough to justify a sweeping generalisation that '*....difference between black South African students and other students.....pertained to career aspirations, attitudes towards evolution and experience with, and attitudes to, animals*'.
- (d) Has the author conducted similar research before, namely African people and animals, which may reveal a prior bias? Bias in research is an example of academic dishonesty.
- (e) Reproducibility: would someone else conducting the same 'exploratory survey' on another group of African students arrive at the same conclusions?
- (f) Can credible publishable conclusions be arrived at, about Africans and land, based on an 'exploratory survey'?

The question whether a research finding derives from the evidence presented goes to the heart of the review process, whether by peers or non-experts. The implied correlation between race and 'attitude towards evolution' in this research is at best a spurious correlation. An example of a spurious correlation is that '*per capita consumption of mozzarella cheese correlates with civil engineering doctorates awarded*'. In general, attitudes towards evolution seem to be strongly influenced by religious beliefs. Whether one believes in creation or evolution or is agnostic is independent of race. There are fundamentalist Christians of all races, all over the world.

A gentle reminder: our ancestors were dispossessed of their land and, in the process, massacred in large numbers. They were forcefully removed and herded into barren and sometimes overcrowded 'native reserves' or homelands; under Apartheid some of these were cynically granted political 'independence'. It is conceivable that some of these forced removals were aimed at making land available for private game farms for the enjoyment of wealthy tourists. The land question remains a divisive and potentially explosive issue in our society and to treat it in what appears to be a cavalier manner, hardly

qualifies as responsible research. As an African child growing up under Apartheid in rural Eastern Cape, my people held the view that some White people treated their pets better than African people. A White child would be encouraged to play with their pets, but scolded when they wanted to play with an African child. The English phrase 'a man's best friend' does not only apply to or have meaning for English-speaking people. In my ancestral village, most families own and take good care of their pets, despite the grinding poverty. When researchers arrive at conclusions which do not accord with our personal experiences, we have an obligation to correct them. Spurious observations from exploratory investigations cannot Trump other forms of knowing.

The Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University conducts research, amongst other things, on contributions to the academic endeavour, and they disaggregate the research outputs by race and gender. White authors are still disproportionately responsible for a large proportion of research captured in all the traditional databases. Academic freedom is a privilege enjoyed by all scientists and research is not an instrument for validating our personal prejudices. The knee jerk responses from scientists to 'threats' to academic freedom gives the impression to members of the public that academic freedom is a vestige of unearned privilege enjoyed by White people. This poses a serious threat to academic freedom. It may inadvertently be an invitation to or an excuse for politicians to consider whether this needs to be regulated. This is a real threat to academic freedom posed by scientists themselves.

Framing a research question in itself requires some background research. Not every question is worth investigating: 'how many angels can dance on the head of a pin' is a common 'example'. Jumping into an opportunistic investigation without the proper background work may be a sign of intellectual laziness. Scientists know that ill-posed research questions would be one of the

reasons that many manuscripts are not accepted for publication. In most instances a manuscript is subject to a peer review before it gets published. In the case of Professor Natrass's paper, there was no peer review. Would it have passed a peer review process? This is one of the issues for consideration by those that express a view on this matter. Although I am not a social scientist, I do not believe that it would have passed a peer review process. Personally I would not have recommended it for publication. I challenge any self-respecting social scientist to publicly confirm that they would approve the manuscript for publication. It is disingenuous to claim that this is a 'commentary'. Members of the public may not know the difference between a commentary and a peer-reviewed article. Be that as it may, a scientist should always maintain the same high standards of academic rigour, irrespective.

We understand this 'opportunistic' investigation to be about what influences the choice of career options by university students. Since this is a universal issue, namely an issue that confronts students of all races all over the world, then the obvious question that comes to mind is the rationale for the focus on African students and the choice of conservation biology. One would assume that some background work was undertaken that informed the choice of this combination. Otherwise another or the same researcher can now choose racial group X and subdiscipline Y and produce another research paper, an example of intellectual laziness. The author creates the impression to the reader that biological sciences and conservation biology can be used interchangeably. At present high school students have a choice of Life Sciences and it is not clear whether the author checked the data of Grade 12 results to support her assertions. Do we know how many African students choose Life Sciences as a matric subject? Do we know how many pass Life Sciences and which degree programmes they registered for at university, even just at the University of Cape Town? There is a wide range of sub disciplines at university level that would fall under biological sciences including

anatomical sciences; physiological sciences; molecular biology; environmental biology; conservation biology; genetics, etc. The author does not enlighten us whether or not African enrollments are also low in these sub disciplines. At least we do know that there is a high demand for places in the medical sciences. How does this observation fit in with her conclusions? The author could have requested data from the Department of Higher Education and Training, whether evidence of enrollments in the Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) category containing biological sciences supports her hypothesis. The author could have enlightened the readers whether the racial distribution of enrollments in conservation biology is an 'outlier' when compared to enrollments in other programmes. During my previous life at Wits University I observed that men appeared to be underrepresented in therapeutic sciences; white students in Mining Engineering; women in Electrical Engineering, African students admitted to the MBA programme; and Indian students over-represented in Dentistry, etc. 'The invisible hand' of the market, first mentioned by Adam Smith in the 1700s, could be a more plausible explanation for some of these. Researchers are often 'skeptical' about their own initial findings and do not rush to publish, simply because they have discovered something or they have been invited to do so. They would check and doublecheck. The rush to publish is often driven by non-academic motives; and it is a threat to the integrity of the academic project.

The question of career choices by high school or university students generally is not new; it is not unique to the University of Cape Town, it is not unique to South Africa. It is a global issue. There are many reasons that have been advanced for under-representation or over-representation by race or gender. All of those reasons that we can think of sound more plausible than the conclusion in this research. These would include issues like parental influence; peer influence; influence by teachers; following in the footsteps of someone they admire; available career guidance; availability of bursaries and

scholarships; employment opportunities. Let us just briefly address two of these issues, namely funding and employment opportunities.

Firstly, students' scholarships and bursaries either from the public or private sectors are often targeted at certain programmes. Both the private and public sectors use the language of 'scarce skills'. How many times have we heard academics in the humanities and social sciences complaining about the disproportionate funding channelled towards STEM disciplines? The financial services sector is chasing graduates with strong quantitative skills. The accounting profession is recruiting from high school, Black students in general and African students in particular to address the gross underrepresentation of Black people in the accounting profession. Provinces are funding students in Health Sciences to address the health disparities and inequities in health provision in our country. The list goes on. Are these less plausible than the relationship that African students supposedly (do not?) have with their pets?

Secondly, highest paying jobs in South Africa are disproportionately occupied by White people. Should we conclude that this is because White people are materialistic; or there is a more plausible explanation for this observation? It can be hypothesised that some learners would prefer to take French or Spanish as a second language rather than isiXhosa. If this were to be established, should we conclude that white learners make this choice because their parents are racist² and regard isiXhosa as a second-class language or even worse? It is worth reminding ourselves that a few years ago, within the university system, we grappled with the national problem of unemployed graduates. This problem persists. Disproportionately unemployed graduates are African. Should African students now be described as materialistic if employment opportunities were one of the issues they would take into consideration when making career choices? How reliable is the mathematics or statistics underpinning the calculations on materialism?

Most of the books that have been written about the 2008 financial crisis, point to the lure of Wall Street for graduates from especially the prestigious universities in the US. Would it be fair to describe these predominantly White graduates as materialistic? Then most of us are materialistic, irrespective of race, gender, or country of origin. Sweeping negative generalisations about people is offensive; and it is racist when generalisations are made about racial groups. Such generalisations undermine our democracy. People who feel offended by this should rightly call it out. It is intellectually disingenuous and lazy to hide behind academic freedom.

There are other examples of academic disingenuity that one believes pose a serious threat to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. In many academic departments almost everywhere, one sometimes notices that disproportionately the academic staff are graduates of the same university; or share the same country of origin; or are adherents of the same religion; or their skin complexion is similar; and the list goes on. And this would be presented as 'academic merit' when maybe it is just crass 'academic nepotism'. Or sometimes people gloss over wrongdoing by highly rated researchers, because other institutions would be prepared to hold their noses and snap them up to boost their research output or institutional ranking. Or denigrate the achievements of female or Black applicants and dismiss them as 'just a transformation candidate'. Or investigations of similar cases of academic dishonesty resulting in a gentle slap for those that belong to a self-styled and self-referential 'academic aristocracy' and heavy sanctions for the 'children of a lesser God'. Such conduct undermines academic freedom. Scientists have a responsibility to protect academic

freedom and institutional autonomy for this and future generations. We expect nothing less.

The International Science Council, to which our Academy of Science of South Africa is affiliated, aims to be '**the global voice of science**'. In a statement it released on 9 June 2020 'In the wake of the death of George Floyd and the global response that it has ignited...', we are reminded of the following:

The Principle of Freedom and Responsibility in Science is enshrined in the Statutes of the International Science Council. It states that the free and responsible practice of science is fundamental to scientific advancement and human and environmental wellbeing. Such practice, in all its aspects, requires freedom of movement, association, expression and communication for scientists, as well as equitable access to data, information, and other resources for research. It requires responsibility at all levels to carry out and communicate scientific work with integrity, respect, fairness, trustworthiness and transparency, recognising its benefit and possible harms.³

Loyiso Nongxa writes in his personal capacity. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa and a Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa.

Notes

1. www.dhet.gov.za/HED/policies/national_plan_on_higher_education/
2. This is adapted from a Twitter comment that was shared on one of the WhatsApp groups.
3. <https://council.science/current/news/statement-on-combating-systemic-racism-and-other-forms-of-discrimination/>