



Making the hidden visible: A challenge and call for submissions

In this issue, Clarke and colleagues¹ take the opportunity publicly to acknowledge the key work contributed by Abel Molepolle to the science emanating from the Sterkfontein Caves. On the occasion of Molepolle's retirement as a senior technician at Sterkfontein, the authors outline his central contributions to the University of the Witwatersrand and Sterkfontein Caves, to science and to training of other technicians and students alike. They note as well the long history of expertise on the part of technicians at Sterkfontein, mentioning key figures who contributed to the illustrious history of palaeontology in our country and globally.

At the *South African Journal of Science*, we were delighted to receive this submission and to work with the authors to see the submission through quality assessment processes and to final publication. The submission has been helpful, also, in alerting us to broader issues, and so we are grateful to the authors, not only for their submission itself, but also for opening our eyes to something we have until now overlooked. Readers will be aware that, following on a long tradition at our Journal, we have over the past number of years been focused on questions of accessibility in science and research in general, and in trying to contribute to making the worlds of science and research more accessible to people previously excluded from or undermined from full participation in all aspects of science. This can be seen, for example, in our [Inclusive Language Policy](#). We are also actively engaged in training and support of scholars wishing to learn more about publishing and peer review (in any journal), with videos of our various trainings being free to access from our [YouTube channel](#). All are free to watch and to use, provided *South African Journal of Science* is acknowledged, and, as always, we welcome critique on our policies and practices from those who use them.

Although we have long been concerned with exclusion and access issues, Clarke et al.'s submission alerted us to the fact that as a journal we have overlooked the key contributions to research by people who, for a range of historical and contemporary reasons, are likely to be overlooked and may be forgotten as histories of science are written 'from above'. There are key people without whom scientific papers would not have been written, but who, according to the current publication authorship guidelines, including our own guidelines and more broadly (see, for example, COPE's guidelines), would not be counted as authors. We have therefore launched a [call for contributions](#) to a Discussion Series on hidden contributors to research. In the call, we note that exclusion from formal contributions to research may be intentional or unintentional, but tends to be inflected along lines of race, gender, social class, access to education, disability and so on. We have noted elsewhere in our pages² how ongoing vast inequalities in our school education system cannot but lead to a situation in which some learners with excellent abilities and interest in careers in research will be far less likely than more privileged counterparts to enter tertiary education, let alone to become leading scholars. Inequality in education from preschool onwards, intertwined with questions of language and access (see, for example, Kerfoot³) should be an urgent concern to every scholar concerned not only about social justice but also about the ongoing flourishing of science and knowledge creation in our country.

We are well aware of the inherent problems in calling for submissions on hidden contributors to South African and African science. There are parallels, for example, with having a National Women's Day as an annual public holiday (9 August), or having an International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3 December). The minute we have a 'special' call to

recognise groups who are excluded or have less power than others, we contribute to a form of rebalkanisation. As much as we would wish to live in a fully accessible world, or what Rosemarie Garland Thomson would call a "habitable world"⁴, designed for and embodying equal access and participation for all, we remain to an extent complicit in reproducing 'special' categories for those we continue to exclude. There are clearly dangers of paternalism and cynical performance of what some have termed "inspiration porn"⁵. It is also the case that there are many crucial, clearly non-academic contributions to research, without which research could not happen – for example, the cleaning and maintenance of buildings, the arranging of transport for field trips, the provision of a functional information technology infrastructure and so on. Indeed, race and gender may play key roles in which academics themselves contribute this kind of care, willingly or not.⁶ We believe, however, that if we are to understand science and academic contributions in their entirety, we need more accounts like that provided by Clarke et al.

As we mention in our call for contributions to the Discussion Series, we will welcome not only accounts of hidden contributions but also of the issues raised by trying to surface these contributions in a way which moves the research field forward. In this regard, as we state, we also hope to receive submissions which engage with the politics and ethics of recognition of research contributions, challenges regarding authorship attribution, and anything which contributes to scholarly debate on questions of recognition and attribution in science as broadly understood. We are aware that we may well not have considered all the issues at stake; it is in the nature of a Discussion Series at its best that there will be a diversity of views and angles through which scholars may approach the issues at hand. In this regard, as always, we welcome contributions that challenge or are directly critical of our initiative and/or point to possible unintended negative consequences. The closing date for submissions is 30 April 2026, and we welcome any pre-submission queries and discussions (directed to sajs.editor@assaf.org.za). All submissions will be subject to our usual quality assessment processes; we hope for a robust, lively and challenging debate.

References

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