



Response from the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA)
on the commentary by Prof Nicoli Nattrass, published in the South
African Journal of Science (SAJS; Vol 116; 5/6)

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PsySSA is the professional body representing psychology professionals in South Africa. PsySSA has, since its inception, been dedicated to making a significant contribution to solving the pressing human development problems in South Africa. PsySSA is committed to the transformation and development of South African Psychology to serve the needs and interests of all South Africa's people. PsySSA advances psychology as a science, profession and as a means of promoting human well-being (<https://www.psytssa.com>).

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PsySSA notes with grave concern the recent commentary published in the South African Journal of Science (SAJS), by Professor Nicoli Nattrass, an academic affiliated to the Institute for Communities and Wildlife in Africa (iCWild) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). In particular, we recognize the indignation expressed by many in the academy, our own membership in PsySSA, and the broader public, given the implicitly racialised nature of the commentary and its potential to recapitulate elements of racialism, that of course have their origins partly in earlier forms of scientific racism.

Titled, "Why are black South African students less likely to consider studying biological sciences?", this two-page commentary presented the results of an exploratory survey carried out amongst UCT students, seemingly in order to measure attitudes towards studying biological sciences. Given the histories of attitudinal research as well as research on race, racism and related social asymmetries that have been conducted in psychology historically, as well as the public interest in the broader contemporary debates in South Africa on matters of racism, PsySSA believes that it is duty-bound to offer its views on the publication of this commentary. As a professional society, we are of course directing this specific response primarily to the broader academy, but will also seek engagement with the many other publics for whom questions of race, racialisation and racism remain central within their lived experience.

PsySSA acknowledges the critiques already levelled against the paper by the Black Academic Caucus (BAC), the UCT Executive, and individual scholars commenting in the public domain. We will therefore not re-engage the critiques of the racialised assumptions, methodological shortcomings, and unfounded generalisations in the paper. We have also read and noted the responses by Professor Nattrass to these criticisms, as well as those who have supported her personally either in principle, or by offering a counterfactual view to the critiques levelled at her commentary.

In our opinion, this was a missed opportunity for Prof Nattrass to engage more reflexively with her contribution to a publication that has not met the minimum standards of ethical nor rigorous scholarship and, at its core, is being criticised substantively for its implicit racial stereotypes that are embedded in the racialised logic of how she both conceptualized the study and interpreted the research results.

Beyond the existing debates on the minutiae of the actual research conducted and the commentary that was then published, we would like to highlight four fatal flaws with both the research and commentary, as well as the responses offered by Prof Nattrass subsequent to the public outrage levelled at her work.

First, as Prof Nattrass is well aware as a seasoned researcher and academic, science is not value-free. It is imbued with all researchers' biases, which seep into their research agendas, methods, the types of questions they deem important, the data they choose to focus on, and the sorts of explanations they use to make sense

of their findings. And science is replete with examples of unethical behaviour and support for racist, anti-poor and sexist ideologies in South Africa and other countries. As such, all researchers, from all disciplines, must show an enormous degree of sensitivity, reflexivity, and critical self-awareness of their potential prejudices, power, and privileges. While we can not know Prof Nattrass' intent absolutely, we are given insights into this when she offers us some of her initial hypotheses about why black students are less likely to consider studying biological sciences: that materialist values and aspirations, previous experiences with pets and wildlife, and the influence of 'Fallist' views, may all supposedly have a downward pressure on the number of black students studying biological sciences and taking up careers in conservation in particular. There is no significant engagement with the complex histories and varied permutations of materialist and post-materialist attitudes and the ways in which they cut across race and class divides in South Africa. Nor is there any real engagement with the social scientific literature on animals, wildlife, ecologies and the environment within black social life historically in South Africa. Finally, 'Fallism' is not unpacked as a political current that itself is complex and has different forms of traction within different sectors of the student population and beyond. The consequence is that the very formulation of the study is defective from the outset because of these critical absences and points of limited reflexivity. This problem is then compounded by a set of analytic interpretations that are generated from this foundational edifice, suggesting that black students have higher levels of materialist values and aspirations, have more negative attitudes towards local birdlife, have somehow not been sufficiently educated in theories of evolution, and that lower levels of pet ownership are likely to have contributed to black students being less likely to consider studying biological sciences. Again this is not qualified at all, and no consideration is given to the critical anthropological, historical, sociological and psychological work on materialism in societies that are largely characterised as market-driven/capitalist, the historical conflation of blacks with animals or sub-human throughout the racist histories of the world, nor the historical relationships between white South Africans and their pets as opposed to white South African and black South Africans, for example. The outcome is that the inference is made that as the mythical black middle class grows, there will be a greater possible uptake of conservation by black students, ostensibly because they are likely to mimic and twin with the white middle class and its values of post-materialism! This is simply erroneous in so many ways – from the foundational development of the research problematic, to the interpretive outcomes, to the very provisional predictions offered.

Second, there has been a great deal of debate about the methods deployed in the study. Prof Nattrass herself has offered multiple rebuttals around matters of method, but method itself does not guarantee sound knowledge. The assumption that good method leads to good science, and therefore results in sound and ethical scholarship and knowledge, is simply fallacious. Those who have worked in the area of race and the heritability of intelligence have used a similar defence, for example. Taking refuge in method when the critiques are more substantively of an ontological or socio-political nature is intellectually lethargic and non-responsive to the substance of the critique.

Third, invoking academic freedom does a dis-service to the principle of academic freedom itself in this instance. The history of the academy indicates that academic freedom itself is unevenly distributed, and therefore some have greater claim to it than others. Prof Nattrass again is well aware of this and exercises this claim liberally. But more importantly, academic freedom has been elevated to an inalienable right (almost as the right to free speech), but neither of these are infinite in their boundaries. With such freedoms come certain rights, but also responsibilities and obligations to utilise these rights in the service of humanity and the broader public good. How this study and commentary serves the public good is unclear to many of us at this time. Those who have come out in defence of Prof Nattrass' right to ask difficult questions and to ruffle feathers is not what is of issue here, but rather that the question of academic freedom does not entitle us to engage in careless scholarship that impacts on the lives of others, under the cover and pretext of asking the supposedly challenging, dissident and cutting edge questions that we need to. For far too long, academic freedom has become a sight for apologists who produce forms of knowledge that reflect neo-conservative views of the world, wittingly or unwittingly (e.g. Bruce Gilley's *The case for colonialism* in *Third World Quarterly*, being a case in point), and this is a risk and threat to the very academic freedom that Prof Nattrass invokes, that we must protect against, as it will compromise the very heart of academic freedom.

Fourth, the argument on academic freedom extends to the sites of knowledge production and dissemination – in this case, the University of Cape Town and the South African Journal of Science. Universities have the social responsibility and moral duty to ensure the veracity of the research being conducted and to safeguard the public from that which would be harmful or deleterious to their well-being. Similarly, journals are not simply platforms for administering peer-review and distributing knowledge, but are places in which such knowledges should be tested to ensure that they meet the basic demands of scientific rigour and are not socially harmful. The tepid response from both the ASSAf and the SAJS Editorial Board are tantamount to abrogating responsibility to the enigmatic peer-review process, and it is certainly not sufficient a response, nor is the injunction to engage in the cut and thrust of debate in the arena that is the pages of the journal itself. Journals have to be much more vigilant in the context of a knowledge economy that expects a rapid turn-around of publications, experiences mass submissions and journal proliferation, an academy that increasingly has been seduced by the publish or perish mantra, and in a world where multiple knowledges are in contested circulation.

It is telling, unfortunate and ironic that this entire matter plays out against the backdrop of the current, global Black Lives Matter protests. PsySSA places on record that we reject any attempt to reduce the dignity of black lives and to reinscribe colonial and racist tropes into academia.

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Consistent with our position related to the publication of racialised research, PsySSA therefore calls on:

- Professor Natrass to unconditionally apologise for her published commentary;
- The SAJS to retract the commentary immediately;
- The SAJS to offer a comprehensive explanation as to the processes that ended in the publication of such a commentary, and to offer a remedial plan of action to avoid this in future; and
- The relevant UCT structures to review its policies and practices related to the vetting of research conducted by staff and students, and determine what measures will be put in place to ensure that future studies do not have a similar outcome.

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