

A close-up photograph of two hands touching. The hand on the left is dark-skinned, and the hand on the right is light-skinned. The hands are positioned as if they are about to shake or are in a gesture of connection. The background is dark and out of focus.

FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

EDITORS

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Race and the Politics of Knowledge in Sports Science

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Introduction

Sports science in South Africa was initially a neglected backwater in academic studies, undertaken by an eccentric group of tenacious dissidents.¹ Previously the term “physical education” had been used, but in 1985 the discipline’s name was changed to “human movement studies”.² The sports science curriculum, to this day, concerns itself narrowly with the technologies of sport performance, giving little consideration to the role of ideology and politics in the field. Two exceptions are the recent book *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies*,³ edited by Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe, and David Andrews, and Malcolm MacLean’s article challenging the hegemonic practices of sports science, “(Re)Occupying a Cultural Commons: Reclaiming the Labour Process in Critical Sports Studies”.⁴ While there has been some attention paid to the politics of knowledge in physical education at school level,⁵ this is not the case in the university discipline known as “sports science”. As a consequence, most sports science students have not engaged critically with “racial science”, which, as this chapter will show, remains a powerful legacy of colonial and apartheid sport into the present.

The vexed article⁶ emerged from the Department of Sport Science of Stellenbosch University that had only recently, in 2018, been reassigned from the Faculty of Education to the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences. It is a study that makes the coloured body central to the discipline’s fixation on measurement; so, for example, the study cites theories that ascribe “the accelerated and unfavourable

[cognitive] decline of women” to factors including “smaller head size ... [and] lower cardiorespiratory fitness levels”.⁷ The cardiovascular health of the coloured women subjects was a factor in sampling decisions⁸ and their coloured bodies were lined up – as in the anthropometric studies of the past – for measurement purposes, this time for standard calculations of body mass index.⁹ All of this raises the critical question posed by Ronald Jackson: “How did black bodies become a problem in the first place?”¹⁰

The main purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to examine at close range the policies and practices that reinforced racism in the history of sports science in South Africa and their continuing legacy in university curricula.

Race in sports science

According to a paper delivered by Jannie Krige at the First South African Congress for Physical Education at Stellenbosch University in 1945, the first anthropometric study on South African whites was carried out in 1926 by G.C.A. van der Westhuyzen under the supervision of Professor C.G.S. de Villiers from Stellenbosch.¹¹ Generating data for many future studies, it concluded that [white] South Africans could be regarded as “one of the great races of the world, ... [one] that is distinguishable from eastern races and negroids”.¹² Since the establishment of the Department of Physical Education at Stellenbosch in 1936, the first of its kind in South Africa and the predecessor of the present Department of Sport Science, a large number of race-based quantitative sports studies appeared. This is not surprising, since Krige had predicted in his paper that “the colour of skin, hair, eyes, facial features and hands will play an important part in physical education”.¹³

Another early study carried out at Stellenbosch University posed the research question: “What physical characteristics does the Cape coloured carry over from his different original tribes?”¹⁴ The conclusion was that “although the coloured retained certain character traits of all his forefathers, he is much more Europeanised than is generally accepted. In other words, the coloured is closer to the European than any of the other races”.¹⁵

Although it cannot be said that all physical education researchers were racists, the structure of South African society certainly was racist. During the 1930s, there were also anti-Semitic sentiments at play at Stellenbosch University, and in 1937 the student newspaper *Pro Libertate* claimed that newly appointed Head of Department for Physical Education, Dr Ernst Jokl, who was Jewish, had vacated the position “under a dark cloud of anti-Jewish sentiment”.¹⁶ He was replaced by a German academic, Anton Obholzer, who announced in the journal *Physical Education* that

physical educationists should be aware that “branches of physical exercises and working methods which correspond to the race characteristics concerned are looked upon as positive”.¹⁷

During this period, physical education researchers gave no consideration to the concept of race being a social construction and proceeded as if it were a biological fact. It is not at all surprising, then, that in 1942 three South African researchers conducted a study that was based on the premise that “some races possess certain abilities in certain sports”.¹⁸ These authors not only overemphasised artificial race differences in their study but also drew spurious conclusions:

The black man's and black women's labour capacity is higher than that of all other races so far studied in South Africa. From the general economic point of view this finding indicates that a labour policy, intelligently and unselfishly applied, and harnessing the immense untapped reservoir of native manpower could transform the African continent.¹⁹

After World War II, South African physical educationists, who were all white, continued on this path of conducting race-based research. These scientists turned to statistical analyses to justify “comparisons between the different races and types”.²⁰ Scientists like J.W. Postma at Stellenbosch University relied on data sets that provided, for example, evidence that “Bantu girls outperform white girls in speed and 600 yards running, [just as] negro children outperform white children in the 35 yards”.²¹

Like most sports scientists, Postma was committed to finding racial explanations for performance in sport. For example, he speculated – ridiculously, as it seems now – about “the longer legs and arms of negroes”; “the smaller chest and vital capacity being a limiting factor for blacks in long distance running”; and how “the successful presence of the yellow-brown race in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games [implies] that race and motor efficiency do not correlate” (freely translated).²² This entrenchment of racism in the field was further evidenced in 1960 by Izak van der Merwe, a professor in the Orange Free State University's Department of Physical Education, who made it clear that the physical education system in South Africa must support the policy of apartheid.²³

Elsewhere in South Africa, the idea of a “healthy white race” remained in the foreground for physical education practitioners at universities. When the University of Pretoria introduced a four-year degree course in physical education in 1947, the appointed lecturer, Claude Smit, an outspoken nationalist, stated that “physical education can make a powerful contribution towards [white] patriotism” (translated from source).²⁴

It should be noted that South African physical educationists were not unique in searching for race-based explanations for performance achievements. Martin Kane, the senior editor of *Sports Illustrated*, argued a case for racial sports science, since “physical differences in the races ... enhanced the athletic potential of the negro”.²⁵ This type of thinking became a matter of common sense throughout the twentieth century.

In 1992, the second edition of Tim Noakes’s *Lore of Running* stated that “black South African runners are characterised by a muscle fibre composition that is different from that found in white distance runners”.²⁶ The same concern about race was evident in the 2001 fourth edition of the book, in which Noakes speculated that “the difference between African and Caucasian runners could be the result of ethnic differences”.²⁷

In general, most sports science studies that refer to race accept it as a biological truth and give no consideration to it as a social construction that “always serves some vested interest”.²⁸ According to Walter Williams, “No one should be surprised to find an implicit reinforcement of the previously explicit racial exclusions”²⁹ in a network of race-based research in postapartheid society.

Uncovering networks of race in modern-day sports science

From the 1970s onwards, many physical education departments throughout the world started lobbying to be moved from education faculties to medical and health sciences faculties. It was, according to Elizabeth Bressan, what these departments considered to be “their big chance for academic respectability; ... physical education [had been forced] into a situation where there was no [other] chance for survival”.³⁰ In their new faculties, physical education, and later sports science, departments in South Africa found themselves in environments where the concept of race and the body was reinforced.

Here I am referring to research projects such as one titled *Ethnic Differences in Alcohol and Drug Use and Related Sexual Risks for HIV among Vulnerable Women in Cape Town, South Africa*. The conclusions drawn in this paper are that:

Alcohol and other drug use among poor black African and coloured women in South Africa compounds their sexual risk for HIV; ... Ethnic differences in sex risk profiles may exist that should be taken into account when planning HIV risk reduction interventions; ... [And] coloured women have more entrenched alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems, particularly related to the use of methamphetamine, and are more likely to report AOD-related sex risks than Black African women.³¹

Thus, it is not surprising that the retracted Sport Science article emerged from the Department of Sport Science, located in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, since it certainly assumes that there exists a relationship between race, sports science, psychology and medicine. This is very much in the tradition of the sports science field relying firmly on research data that uses biological markers to justify the concept of race. One paper that the Sport Science article cites is that of Erasmus et al., which defines coloured people in purely biological terms as “a group that comprises an ancestry of about 32–43% Khoisan, 20–36% black, 2–28% white and 9–11% Asian”.³² The study presents these markers as fixed and permanent, without considering the idea that coloured identity is a social and political construction instead of a biological occurrence.

The Sport Science article also presents the “coloured community as a homogenous group that are generally described as a poor, lower working-class community”. Paradoxically, however, this depiction was based on the work of Du Plessis and Van der Berg, who state that “the coloured population’s diversity was perhaps greater than their common characteristics”.³³ Incidentally, Du Plessis and Van der Berg presented an equally problematic conclusions in their own study, which attempted to explain why poverty has remained so pervasive within this group from 1865 till the twenty-first century. They concluded that “patterns of behaviour established over centuries may still be dominant and to the detriment of the coloured population”.³⁴ They further state:

It is apparent that the progression rates [from grade 10 to matric] of the coloured population, having been remarkably high in the cohorts born before 1920, fell sharply thereafter and were even lower than those of the poorer, less urban black population for the cohorts born between 1920 and 1964, and were at par with that of the black population for the 1965-69 birth cohort.³⁵

This is not a very penetrating observation though, since it fails to take into account that the 1905 School Board Act in the Cape Colony made school attendance and education provision compulsory for white children only. The same Act proved to be the forerunner of race-based education legislation that affected the provision of physical education (and education in general) to children of colour.³⁶

The authors of the alcohol and drug use study cited above and the retracted Sport Science article³⁷ reveal alike a lack of understanding of the socially and politically constructed nature of race classification, as shown, for example, by their references to “mixed races”. Thus, Meyers et al. assert that:

The terms white, black African, Asian/Indian, and coloured refer to demographic markers that were chosen [for the study] for their historical significance and are still used today. Coloured refers to a grouping of people of mixed-race ancestry

that self-identify as a particular ethnic and cultural grouping in South Africa. The continued use of these markers is important for identifying ethnic disparities in health and for monitoring improvements in health and socio-economic disparities in South Africa.³⁸

In a similar vein, one of the authors of the Sport Science article, speaking in an interview on *Cape Talk* radio, said: “We have to look at different racial groups, we have to specify. All population groups have different problems and we have to characterise that.”³⁹ This is no different from what Anton Obholzer, the then-departmental chair of the Stellenbosch University Physical Education department, propagated in 1939: “The characteristics of a race are not only to be found in the physical traits, such as build, form of skull, complexion, etc. but also in the psychological aspects of life. This must be taken into consideration.”⁴⁰

What such research does, according to poet Diana Ferrus, is to allow racial supremacist ideas to strive, survive, and thrive. Not surprisingly, the Cape Flats Women’s Movement issued a statement on social media in response to the Sport Science article:

We are the demographic of your study. Life on the Cape Flats is brutal and the challenges we face are endless. We don’t think you can even begin to imagine what kind of mental ability this takes. How do you think our children look at us now that a famous university has declared their mothers to be idiots?

The Sport Science article, researched by five white women, underscores the need expressed by bell hooks “for confronting a reality of white female racism”.⁴¹

In general, black women remain more vulnerable than their white counterparts, and here it is relevant that all of the women whom the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) has pursued thus far for being intersex (the hyperandrogenism cases) – Caster Semenya, Dutee Chand, and others – are women of colour. Yet, it is not only white racism that threatens human liberation. The critically minded sport scientist is aware that racial discrimination, sexism and economic inequality are also at work in oppressed communities.⁴² Students and academics would do well to listen to Frantz Fanon, who says in this regard, “Colonial racism is no different from any other racism ... every one of my acts commits me as a [human]. Every one of my silences, every one of my cowardices reveals me as a human.”⁴³

Final thoughts

In conclusion, I turn my attention to possible practices to break down racist prejudices in sports science. A starting point is to identify, admit and show remorse for the racist networks that exist in sports science. Such a commitment requires a deep

and continuous reflection on the existing sports science curriculum. In this process, sports science students need to be taught about the dangers of racial essentialism as applied to the athletic body, and the human body more broadly.

Reflection is also a form of mourning, a process of lamenting the continued assault on the world's colonised/oppressed peoples' identities and social realities. It is an important part of healing and it leads to dreaming. Dreaming is when colonised peoples invoke their histories, world views and indigenous knowledge systems to theorise and imagine alternative possibilities – in this instance a more inclusive future for sports science methodologies.⁴⁴

In this way, sports science research could, as other fields of scientific inquiry do, enable students to refuse to accept myths, stereotypes and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of human experience.⁴⁵ This work should not, however, be deferred to a distant future. Here, Fanon helps us understand that, “[t]he present will always contribute to building of the future. ... In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducibly to my time.”⁴⁶

The creation of new, deracialised sports science languages requires breaking the stranglehold that the politics of academic politeness has over the sports science field when it comes to issues of race. This academic politeness is expressed in the uncritical acceptance of visual vestiges of the racist past – for example, the unchallenged display of images of white former members of the Stellenbosch Physical Education Department – and in the hegemonic assimilation of students and staff into dominant cultures.

This uncritical attitude makes students stand in awe of a system of race stigmatisation, veiled by sophisticated scientific terminologies, that remains unchallenged in sports science curricula. New areas of investigation that engage with present political discourses through challenging past racial imbalances such as the political economy of sport, social sports studies⁴⁷ and standpoint theory⁴⁸ should be brought to the fore.

It is to be hoped that a new generation of sports scientists with a knowing agency, an understanding of domains of oppression within structuring systems, will emerge to break down race-based stereotypes in sports science and create new epistemologies that challenge racist ideologies with the objective of teaching and developing a decolonial and anti-racist sports science. It remains a constant and difficult fight, fraught with resistance from those who continue to practise the politics of race-based knowledge through sports science.

Endnotes

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- 13 Ibid., 67.
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