



# FAULT

A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

# LINES

EDITORS

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## A Century of Misery Research on Coloured People

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You know, they are a negative group ... a non-person. They are the people that were left after the nations were sorted out. They are the rest.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

When a group of Stellenbosch University (SU) researchers published an article on the “low cognitive functioning” and “unhealthy lifestyle behaviours” of coloured women,<sup>2</sup> there was immediate outrage across the campus and the country. Yet this particular piece of published research was by no means exceptional. In fact, for the past hundred years Stellenbosch – and other South African universities – had been engaged in what is called race-essentialist research, that is, studies that insisted that there are four racial groups (whites, Indians, coloureds and Africans) and that certain aptitudes, behaviours and even diseases were directly related to these political classifications.<sup>3</sup>

Take an assortment of medical conditions and you will find research that linked a racial classification to a particular physical ailment or status: Indians had stomach ulcers. Afrikaners had high cholesterol. Coloureds had TB, or tuberculosis. African women had stronger pelvic floor muscles compared to other “racial groups”.<sup>4</sup> What was claimed for biomedical problems was also assumed for a range of social conditions from the early 1900s into the present – that there is a relationship between your presumed racial group and certain social, health and behavioural outcomes. No one group was more affected by these studied associations between racial classification and negative outcomes than those classified as coloured under apartheid – something this chapter calls misery research.

Misery research is the propensity to describe a group of people through the lens of disgust. The attribution of disgust has been applied to various outgroups, such as the Roma (Gypsies) of Europe<sup>5</sup> or unauthorised immigrants in North America.<sup>6</sup> The stigmatised group is represented in public discourse as problematic and pitiful in who they are and how they live their lives. They are portrayed as lacking in certain social sensibilities, such as prudent sexual behaviours or the conduct of respectable family lives. These groups make bad choices, threaten public decency, break the law and seem forever stuck in their sad situation. Studies of such groups tend to focus singularly on their state of misery, so that the supposed condition of the part (a small sample) substitutes for the whole, as in studies of coloured people.

### Digging in the archives

As soon as the controversial publication became public knowledge, a SU research team started to dig up all available institutional research on the subject of coloured people over the course of a hundred years, since the first full year of SU's academic founding in 1919 through to 2019. The starting hypothesis of this review was that the troubled research on coloured women's cognition and health was not an aberration, but one in a long tradition of misery research about this particular group of citizens.

Most of the SU research on coloured people was available in the form of master's and doctoral research published in the form of a dissertation.<sup>7</sup> The dissertation turned out to be an ideal subject for trying to understand how SU as an institution regarded and represented the coloured community through research. That is because the dissertation is an institutional product. While a student is required to indicate on completion that the dissertation is their own work, in reality it is the outcome of a complex institutional process. The student approaches or is assigned a university supervisor; in most cases, that student is directed towards a particular area of research familiar to the supervisor, and one in which s/he has interest and expertise. Often there is a group of students working in the same area, e.g. coloured gangs.

The university passes the research proposal through ethical review and funds the dissertation research from internal and/or outside resources. The dissertation proposal is approved by a university committee. The completed dissertation is examined internally, and often externally as well. A final decision is made by the university authorities to award the degree. Out of the dissertation, the student and the supervisor often co-author one or more journal articles from the dissertation. In short, the dissertation is a product of university processes and therefore offers a unique insight into the institutional mind on the subject – in this case, coloured people.

The study also examined other research reports, journal articles and published opinions from academics and leaders at SU over the century that specifically dealt with coloured people. Of special interest were the in-house journals of the University, as well as four commissions on coloured people, all of which were led and heavily represented by SU professors and their researchers.<sup>8</sup> In this way, using a rich collection of institutional documentation, it was possible to gain a reliable account of how SU research portrayed a group of people who came to be formally classified as “coloured” under apartheid.

## A thematic analysis of race and research at Stellenbosch University

An earlier study undertook a longitudinal analysis of research on coloured people to determine what exactly was studied about the subject in each decade since 1919.<sup>9</sup> What this chapter offers is a thematic analysis of the research about coloured people to find out what common areas of inquiry were pursued at the University.

Over the course of 100 years, there are five major themes about coloureds represented in the institutional research that emerges from this single university. To be sure, there are minor research themes on coloureds as subjects of institutional study, such as their cognitive abilities,<sup>10</sup> bone measurements,<sup>11</sup> culture<sup>12</sup> and work habits.<sup>13</sup> This section, however, focuses on those studied areas in which there is a more substantial volume of academic research on a specific theme of coloured lives inside one institution, Stellenbosch University.

### The intimate lives of coloured people

A first theme is concerned with *the intimate lives of coloured people*. This theme covers broad topics, such as sex, morality and relationships. One concentration within this body of research has to do with the immoral lives of coloureds, their sexual passions, and venereal diseases.<sup>14</sup> Another concentration involves research on family planning – or the lack thereof – amongst coloured people,<sup>15</sup> family housing conditions<sup>16</sup> and family relationships.<sup>17</sup>

It was McDonald<sup>18</sup> who kicked off an enduring tradition of intimate research on “Die sedelike toestand van die Kleurling familie”.<sup>19</sup> Not lacking in restraint, this research dissertation from the Faculty of Arts & Philosophy launches into “die onbeskaafde leefwyse van vele [Kleurling] ouers”<sup>20</sup> and the “sedelike korruptheid van die Kleurling”.<sup>21</sup> In their very origins, “Die tans bestaande kleurling-bevolking is uitsluitlik afkomstig van heidense voorouers wat in gebreke was aan hoë sedelike norme en standaarde”.<sup>22</sup> The moral depravity of the coloured is a lifelong curse, for “In skande is the Kleurling gebore en in skande sit hy sy lewe voort en dit tot sy eie nadeel en vernietiging”.<sup>23</sup>

Inside South Africa's democracy, one would expect a toning down of such racial invective about the intimate lives of coloured people in SU research. It is nevertheless in the postapartheid period that a set of studies on coloured women's sexual behaviours come under special scrutiny. The focus of this research is on high-risk behaviours of coloured women,<sup>24</sup> for whom sexual relationships were "a primary source of meaning-giving" ... "pervading all aspects of their everyday existence".<sup>25</sup> When studying "Die verskille tussen bruin en swart adolessente se seksuele gedrag", blacks were worse than coloureds, since they had more sex earlier ("coitus"), more pregnancies and more masturbation.<sup>26</sup>

### The decrepit lives of coloured people

Another theme focuses on *the decrepit lives of coloured people*. In this line of research, coloureds are represented as suffering from illness, disease and infirmity.<sup>27</sup> It is not only the living who come under biomedical scrutiny for health conditions but also the dead, as in a productive area of Stellenbosch research – coloured cadavers in the University's Kirsten Collection in the Anatomy Department of the Medical School.<sup>28</sup> The strong association between coloureds and tuberculosis is another area of prolific and sustained research at SU,<sup>29</sup> alongside such infections as HIV.<sup>30</sup> In addition to physical illnesses amongst coloured people, such as venereal diseases,<sup>31</sup> there is also research over the decades on the emotional ailments of coloureds,<sup>32</sup> and the health consequences of substance abuse.<sup>33</sup>

One powerful illustration of the underlying racism in the decrepit lives of the group is found in this study on premature babies by the Department of Pediatrics, which juxtaposes animal undernutrition with that of coloured women:

Studies in diere het getoon dat moederlike ondervoeding die geboortemassa van die pasgeborenes aansienlik verminder. Kaapse Kleurlingmoeders is beduidend korter, ligter en maerder as blanke moeders.<sup>34</sup>

### The criminal lives of coloured people

The criminal lives of coloured people constitute another enduring line of research inside SU. The representation of coloureds as gangsters is commonplace in research on criminal behaviour,<sup>35</sup> and special attention is paid to youth offenders within this genre.<sup>36</sup> Here, too, the tendency is towards racial comparisons; perhaps unsurprisingly, the research shows that coloured people are more aggressive than other "races",<sup>37</sup> and that there is a relationship between aggression and social competence where, once again, coloureds perform the worst.<sup>38</sup> In all four major commissions into coloured people, the criminal lives of coloured people would come to enjoy substantial attention.<sup>39</sup> Even when a more progressive lens was trained on

the coloured as subject, it was often about criminal behaviour, such as in a doctoral dissertation on “The Cape rapist”.<sup>40</sup>

This racial trope on coloured criminality is well-established in these studies. A coloured is a violent gangster prone to substance abuse, which in turn leads to all kinds of criminal activities that degrade the community.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, coloured youth criminals are intellectually impaired, so that there is a relationship between verbal intelligence and moral judgement.<sup>42</sup> It is a deeply embedded dysfunctionality that has not changed over the years and has become part of the coloured experience, as one study concluded: “Delinquent behaviour is still endemic amongst a large part of this community.”<sup>43</sup>

### **The drinking habits of coloured people**

Another persistent theme in institutional research concerns *the drinking lives of coloured people*. In this research, drinking is not a social event but a criminal habit of “the problem drinker”.<sup>44</sup> Such studies are often related to coloured farm labourers in the vineyards, where alcohol served as full or partial payments to workers – the so-called *tot system*.<sup>45</sup> This research speaks of “a drinking pattern”<sup>46</sup> and describes alcohol as an essential feature of coloured identity<sup>47</sup> that organises social life and industry,<sup>48</sup> constitutes male friendships<sup>49</sup> and leads to all kinds of criminal activity,<sup>50</sup> from which they need to be rescued through legislation<sup>51</sup> and social welfare.<sup>52</sup> Even with alcohol abuse, the compulsion to compare across racial categories reflects once again the commitment to racial essentialism underpinning institutional research.<sup>53</sup>

### **The pitiful lives of coloured people**

The strongest theme running through SU research over the years is *the pitiful lives of coloured people*, who need to be uplifted through social welfare. That is to say, coloured people are subjects to be ridiculed and rescued at the same time.<sup>54</sup> The target areas for upliftment include coloured poverty,<sup>55</sup> coloured education<sup>56</sup> and coloured growth, development and expansion more generally.<sup>57</sup>

There are two institutions key to this coloured rescue act – the government’s social welfare department<sup>58</sup> and the church.<sup>59</sup> All the major commissions into coloured people lay emphasis on the *opheffing* (upliftment) of this frail and feckless population.<sup>60</sup> More recent research, while offering a sympathetic treatment of the subject,<sup>61</sup> would nevertheless treat coloureds as powerless,<sup>62</sup> trapped in their misery<sup>63</sup> and still in need of improved treatment.<sup>64</sup> In other words, the picture of pitifulness rather than agency or activism (see by contrast, Lewis<sup>65</sup>; Soudien<sup>66</sup>) continues to frame coloured people as subjects of institutional study.

## Making sense of a century of misery research on coloured people

There is no other group of South Africans who have been subjected, through the conduct of research, to such an unrelenting assault on their dignity and humanity as those classified as coloured under apartheid. Why?

For white Afrikaners, coloured people constituted an existential threat to their own fragile identities as they emerged from the devastation of the South African War of 1899-1902. With the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the early twentieth century and the determination to build a united *volk*, coloureds threatened the purity of race and the politics of white identity formation.<sup>67</sup> They had to be separated “in life and limb” from the whites, the SU academic P.J. Coertze<sup>68</sup> would forcefully argue in the 1940s. It was particularly “poor whites” in this period who faced “the threat of disqualification from whiteness”<sup>69</sup> by being relegated to the status of coloured people.<sup>70</sup> Hence the call for an emphatic distancing between Afrikaners and coloureds and the need to “police the borders of whiteness”.<sup>71</sup> Calls for segregation, however, had an unexpected logic, as the foremost historian of Afrikaners would put it: “Separation was necessary not because people were so different from one another but rather because they were so alike.”<sup>72</sup> Separation, however, was not enough.

In order to justify such absolute distancing between the two groups, coloureds had to be described not only as different from whites in every way but as objects of moral disgust – drunk, sickly, weak, rapacious, violent, aggressive, irresponsible and unintelligent. It was therefore not only apartheid laws and policies but research itself that was summoned to present coloureds as repulsive – as meriting social, physical and cultural separation from whites. Disgust is not, however, employed only to invoke moral repulsion but serves as a political device for distancing outgroups through dehumanisation.<sup>73</sup>

## Misery research and the compulsion to compare

To merely describe coloured persons as objects of moral disgust would serve no purpose without also comparing and contrasting them with whites. The goal is to prove that whites stand on a higher rung of civilisation in every sense and that coloureds are below them – as decades of research was intent on showing from the very beginning. Whites had more bodily hair than coloureds.<sup>74</sup> Whites were intelligent, coloureds less so.<sup>75</sup> The Eur-Hott group had a medium-sized penis but that of the Bushman would “descend and elongate as soon as the Bantu element mixes with the Bushman”.<sup>76</sup> Whites have culture, whereas coloureds have no culture, no poets and no writers.<sup>77</sup>

As time moves on, the odious comparisons persist. Venereal disease is more common amongst non-whites than whites, a statement that even the researchers

concede that they had no evidence for.<sup>78</sup> Essential hypertension, says Venter,<sup>79</sup> might well have to do with the skin colour of the different races. Where coloureds do have culture, it is “*eiesoortig*” (unique to the group) insists Matilda Burden,<sup>80</sup> and poses no threat to distinctive white music. Coloureds are more aggressive than other “cultural groups” holds Norma Katherine Möller,<sup>81</sup> and more susceptible to tuberculosis.<sup>82</sup> Even amongst the dead, markings on skeletal bones show that the health deficiencies of coloureds exceed those of whites,<sup>83</sup> while Van der Walt<sup>84</sup> found value in comparing the strength of the pelvic floor muscles of coloureds with those of whites and Africans.

Comparison, as these studies have shown, is not neutral. It was used to establish and reinforce apartheid’s artificial hierarchies of race, in which whites remained atop the civilisational ladder in culture, intelligence, health, education and every other social or economic indicator, followed by Indians, coloureds and Africans at the bottom of the pile.<sup>85</sup>

Is it possible, nonetheless, that the research is simply drawing attention to the obvious – that coloureds are drunk, violent and miserable people? To begin with, every community, however defined, has always had social and economic outcasts, such as South Africa’s poor whites.<sup>86</sup> Which group to study within a particular community is a choice. The consistent pattern of SU research over the decades was to home in on low-income communities – as in the case of the Sport Science article on coloured women’s cognition. There is virtually no SU dissertation research on the coloured middle classes (by contrast, see Soudien<sup>87</sup>; April and Josias<sup>88</sup>), since they defy the much-needed stereotype of this misery group and therefore rattle the ideological certainties of race and accomplishment on which white power and privilege so much relied.

Only in recent times has there emerged the beginnings of a substantive scholarship from within SU on the coloured middle classes, and their achievements and struggles under the weight of apartheid oppression. Chief amongst these writings is the work of Stellenbosch historians, such as Herman Giliomee’s<sup>89</sup> striking account of a dignified, hardworking class of coloured people, many of whom built and owned their own well-kept homes in the town before the tragedy of forced removals.

There is also in SU research a more recent shift from merely describing the miserable conditions of *some* coloured people to explaining their conditions of deprivation and poverty in relations to systems of power.<sup>90</sup> People from low-income communities were not born poor, nor are their struggles because of something inherent in *colouredness*. Coloured people – like black people more generally – were made poor through damning racial legislation,<sup>91</sup> even as “poor whites” were uplifted through pro-white government policies long before the inauguration of apartheid in 1948.<sup>92</sup>



## Conclusion

When the wife of the last white President of South Africa described coloured people as “a negative group ... a non-person ... the rest” (see epigraph), Marika de Klerk was not only reflecting a good measure of white public opinion; she had solid backing from a century of institutional research depicting this group of citizens in such degrading terms.

As this chapter has shown, it was the political threat of coloured people to white identity and white supremacy that explains the enduring legacy of misery research inside the University that became the laboratory for producing the knowledge that would become the foundation on which apartheid policies and plans towards this group of South Africans would be built. To this end, coloured people had to be defined as a distinctive, as well as a decrepit, racial group in order to legitimise their absolute distancing from white people.

What does all of this mean for the transformation of knowledge and of race relations on the campus and in the country, given the long shadow of apartheid? It means recognising how race has assumed the status of common sense in the understanding of ourselves and others. The idea that there are racial essences (something within) that define us as coloured or white or African is taken for granted in everyday life; this is called *racial essentialism* and it is found in much of the research surveyed in this study.

The idea that there are racial determinants to the behaviour of groups carrying different classifications is also commonplace even in everyday expressions: coloured men are drunkards and coloured women are oversexed; this is called *racial determinism*, which idea also runs through many of the studies covered in this review.

Changing such deeply held beliefs will not be easy, since every South African is socialised from early on in life to think of him/herself as part of a race and to think of each race as having particular characteristics and behaving in particular ways; this is something the co-author once referred to as *knowledge in the blood*.<sup>93</sup>

But change can and does happen – as in the case of Professor C.S. (Kees) van der Waal from the Anthropology Department of Stellenbosch University, who recognised the power of his academic socialisation within his discipline when it was still called *Volkekunde*. In his words, “I had been formed into a myopic, conservative racist”,<sup>94</sup> but as he became exposed to other schools of thought in anthropology, he recognised the roots of his dilemma – “the danger of essentialism”.<sup>95</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Words of the late Marika de Klerk, former wife of the last white President of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk, during a campaign speech to pensioners in 1983.
- 2 Sharné Nieuwoudt et al., “Retracted Article: Age- and Education-Related Effects on Cognitive Functioning in Colored South African Women”, *Neuropsychology, Development, And Cognition. Section B: Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition* (2019): 93–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825585.2019.1598538>
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- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Madeleine Dalsklev and Jonas Rønningsdalen Kunst, “The Effect of Disgust-Eliciting Media Portrayals on Outgroup Dehumanization and Support of Deportation in a Norwegian Sample”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 47, no. C (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.028>
- 6 Shantal R. Marshall and Jenessa R. Shapiro, “When ‘Scurry’ vs. ‘Hurry’ Makes the Difference: Vermin Metaphors, Disgust, and Anti-Immigrant Attitudes”, *Journal of Social Issues* 74, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12298>
- 7 The conventions differ, with some universities, like SU, using the term “thesis” for the PhD research report and “dissertation” for the master’s research. For ease of reference only, this chapter uses the term “dissertation” for both master’s and PhD research study reports.
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- 9 Jonathan D. Jansen, Cyrill Walters and Mkululi D. Nompumza, “A Scholarship of Contempt and Pity: A Century of Research on Coloured People at Stellenbosch University, South Africa” (in press).
- 10 M.L. Fick, “Intelligence Test Results of Poor White, Native (Zulu), Coloured and Indian School Children and the Educational and Social Implications”, *South African Journal of Science* 26, no. 12 (1929); Sharné Nieuwoudt et al., “Retracted Article: Age- and Education-Related Effects On Cognitive Functioning In Colored South African Women”.
- 11 J.A. Keen, “Cranimetric Study of the Cape Coloured Population”, *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 33, no. 1 (1951), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00359195109519876>; G.W. Wagener and F.S. Hough, “Metacarpal Bone Mass in the White and Coloured Populations of the Cape”, *South African Medical Journal = Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Geneeskunde* 72, no. 3 (1987).
- 12 Matilda Burden, “Die Afrikaanse Volkslied onder die Bruinmense” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 1991); Alfred Mautsane Thutloa and Kate Huddleston, “Afrikaans as an Index of Identity among Western Cape Coloured Communities”, *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics* 40 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5774/40-0-39>

- 13 Johann Eckhardt Briedenhann, “Die Aard en Omvang van Werksafwesigheid by Kleurlingwerkers in Kaapse Nywerhede” (MA diss., Stellenbosch University, 1974); M.K. du Toit, “Identiteitsprobleme en Die Implikasies Daarvan vir die Werksmotivering van die Kleurlingwerknemer”, *Tydskrif vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede* 24, no. 3 (1973).
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- 15 Blanche de Wet, “Gesinsbeplanning by die Kleurling”, *Maatskaplike Werk/Social Work* 5, no. 4 (1969); W.P. Mostert and Ferda Groenewald, “Gesinsbeplanningmotivering van Kleurlingvroue in Namakwaland”, *Tydskrif vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede* 29, no. 2 (1978).
- 16 Anna Sophia van Wyk, “Behoeftes en Waardes van Kleurlingvroue ten Opsigte van Behuisingsomstandighede” (M. in Huishoudkunde diss., Stellenbosch University, 1980).
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- 19 Ibid., 93-114.
- 20 Ibid., 91.
- 21 Ibid., 92.
- 22 Ibid., 94.
- 23 Ibid., 98.
- 24 Lesch, “Female Adolescent Sexuality in a Coloured Community”, 164.
- 25 Burger, “Heterosexual Context and Adolescent Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviour: An Explorative Study in a Coloured Community”, iii.
- 26 West, “Die Verskille tussen Bruin en Swart Adollesente se Seksuele Gedrag”.
- 27 Ethelwynn Linda Stellenberg, “An Investigation into the Factors Influencing the Health Status of the Coloured People of the Western Cape in an Urban Setting” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch, 2000).
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- 29 Chantal Louiza Babb, "Identification of Candidate Genes and Testing for Association with Tuberculosis in Humans" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University), <http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/21524>; Michelle Daya, "Using Bioinformatics and Biostatistics to Elucidate Susceptibility to Tuberculosis in an Admixed Population" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2015); Erika de Wit, "Analysis of Host Determining Factors in Susceptibility to Tuberculosis in the South African Coloured Population" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2009).
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- 33 Herbert Douglas Davis, "'Spyt Kom Te Laat': The Development and Evaluation of a Health-Related Fotonovela about Methamphetamine ('Tik') Use in the Western Cape and Northern Cape Provinces of South Africa" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2017).
- 34 M.P. Keet et al., "Small-for-Age Babies: Etiological Factors in the Cape Colored Population", *South African Medical Journal = Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Geneeskunde* 60, no. 5 (1981): 199.
- 35 W.G. le Roux, "Die Kleurling-Jeugbende in Kaapstad" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 1951).
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- 39 Cilliers, *Wes-Kaapland, 'n Sosio-Ekonomiese Studie: 'n Samevatting en Opsomming van die Navorsing Uitgevoer onder die Wes-Kaaplandse Navorsingsprojek van die Universiteit van Stellenbosch*; Theron and Swart, *Die Kleurlingbevolking van Suid-Afrika: 'n Verslag van 'n Komitee van die Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede (SABRA) insake die Kleurling*; Theron, *Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group*; Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Cape Coloured Population of the Union*.
- 40 Chet J.P. Fransch, "'... Wood Carved by the Knife of Circumstance...?': Cape Rapists and Rape in South Africa, c.1910-1980" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2016).

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