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HOW TO CITE:

Essop H, Long W. Black – and
not offended. *S Afr J Sci.* 2020;
116(special issue), Art. #8586,
2 pages. [https://doi.org/
10.17159/sajs.2020/8586](https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/8586)

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

academic freedom, politics of
representation, scientific
racism

PUBLISHED:

10 July 2020

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Black – and not offended

Universities, a leading South African academic once noted, are places of discomfort, testing boundaries, posing uncomfortable questions, challenging received truths. It is only natural that some will feel offended, occasionally, by the questions intellectuals ask. It is not that academic etiquette and basic ethical standards have been dispensed with in the formulation of such questions—only that questions, as interpretive acts in themselves, are bound to ruffle feathers. But when a question does cause upset, this does not relieve academics of the duty to respond on the basis of factual and rational analysis. Unfortunately, some of the responses to the recent commentary published by Nicoli Nattrass¹ fall short in this regard.

To begin with, initial statements by those who were ‘offended’ by the commentary in question did not elaborate on their reasons for feeling offended. For instance, the UCT Faculty of Science distanced itself from the commentary, stating that ‘the article makes disturbing assumptions about all black South African students, including those in the Department of Biological Sciences and the Faculty of Science at UCT’²—without providing any indication what those assumptions were. In several media statements, parties who disagreed with the commentary cited ‘assumptions’³ made by Nattrass, presumably referring to her ‘materialist index.’

While Nattrass does not explain the research process in detail, it is evident from the analysis that the survey respondents selected their own answers to the questions that were used to derive this particular variable. In what way, then, can this be ‘offensive’ if the regression analysis was based on the participants’ own responses? The ‘materialist’ variable in the analysis in no way constitutes an ‘assumption.’ To be sure, this much is true of all the variables used in the statistical analysis.

This does not suggest, however, that Nattrass’s commentary is beyond critique. The survey is described by the author as ‘opportunistic’⁴ and does not represent the UCT student population—let alone a more appropriate national black student population. It is entirely correct, therefore, that a survey of this nature cannot be used to infer anything about the population, although this fact does not invalidate participants’ responses to the survey itself. As for the primary research question of the commentary, one might argue that the correct target group to survey would be students who are considering tertiary education in the future. Indeed, students already at university are likely to have adjusted their views on the topic as universities invariably influence their thinking over time. At risk of belaboring the point, there are several limitations in this commentary—some of which Nattrass identifies herself—but what remains to be explained is why they should have resulted in so much offense being taken.

Doubtless, the so-called ‘politics of representation’ is one important factor. Nowadays, it is considered politically incorrect to speak on behalf of oppressed groups if one is not from such a group oneself. Natrass must surely know this. But what kind of world would we be settling for if white people restrained themselves from speaking out against racism on the grounds that they were not black? Or citizens of the world refusing to condemn the oppression of Rohingya Muslims if they were not themselves Rohingya Muslims? Apartheid would surely not have ended in 1994 if non-South Africans from around the world had not pressured their governments into isolating the racist regime.

And what exactly is so ‘offensive’ to the UCT executive and the Black Academic Caucus about claiming that some black South Africans want to pursue financially lucrative professions? Taken at face value, the censorious response of these two groupings suggests the workings of a reversal in which, perversely, they do not want the academic community to see the connection between poverty and material aspiration. Or perhaps they question their own aspirations in a white-dominated environment.

Natrass has been hauled over the coals for allegedly perpetrating stereotypes about ‘black people in general.’⁵ But what kind of stereotype is the UCT executive and BAC perpetuating about ‘black people in general’ with their claim that we are all ‘offended?’ Are they not creating the disturbing impression that ‘black people in general’ are too sensitive to engage in scholarly debate when the topic under discussion is close to home? As two black academics, the UCT executive and BAC does not speak on our behalf—and we can only hope that other senior black intellectuals who are expressing their disquiet in private, will speak out in public and do what professors are meant to do: profess.

This does bring us, however, to one final, equally troubling matter. With the present

debate playing out furiously in the media, what does this reveal about the academic process itself? Evidently, the ivory tower is not what it used to be. It is significant that intellectuals now see fit to take their first responses to news outlets rather than academic journals. If Natrass’s commentary were so ill-informed, it should have been coolly dismantled in the pages of the South African Journal of Science. That is, after all, why academic journals are established in the first place. Unfortunately, if the current furor is anything to go by, then the ‘outrage porn’ so typical of social media has clearly begun to infiltrate the academic project. And that is a prospect that should concern us all.

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