FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

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Preface

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Sometimes a controversial research publication can be a blessing in disguise. This is certainly the case with the now-retracted article published in 2019 by researchers in the Department of Sport Science at Stellenbosch University (SU). The article claimed, in short, that coloured women “presented with” low education levels and unhealthy lifestyles. While these published claims caused considerable harm to people of colour, it forced into the open a long overdue debate on race, science and society. What the article did, in other words, was to expose dangerous fault lines in how research (and indeed teaching) is conducted in South African universities and across the world.

In geology, a fault line is a sudden crack or fissure in the earth’s surface that portends deeper problems in the crust below. The crack is therefore a warning sign that requires urgent action, failing which something worse could happen. This book deploys the metaphor of the fault line to suggest that the Sport Science article pointed to a number of problems below the surface of the rock-solid research enterprise in this and other universities. Those underlying problems include the ease with which human subjects in research are assigned to their apartheid racial classifications: for example, a recent SU study on the relative strength of the pelvic muscles of coloured, African and white women. Or the tendency in research to explain social, health or behavioural outcomes as if these were determined by colouredness, for example, a common set of studies on tuberculosis amongst coloured people.

This book brings together some of the most accomplished scholars and scientists at Stellenbosch and other universities to explain why these fault lines exist, where they come from, and what danger they warn of when it comes to race, science and society. The authors address these fault lines from different disciplinary perspectives that include anthropology, political science, medicine, ethics, sociology, education, literary studies, theology, genetics and history. As a result, this rich collection of chapters offers insights deep below the surface manifestations of the problems of race and research at South African universities.

What runs through these chapters is a shared concern with the politics of knowledge. Put simply, when researchers conduct research, they are producing knowledge. Yet the process of doing research and generating knowledge is anything but simple.

Those who do research have power (resources, money, status), while those they study often do not – as in the case of studies on vulnerable communities. Research in some disciplines is funded by large private-sector companies that sometimes have an interest in the results – as in the case of pharmaceutical companies. Researchers can publish results and make consequential claims about their subjects; this is one reason why research in universities needs approval from academic and ethics committees. Published research can earn money in South Africa in the form of state subsidies for accredited publications. Good research can advance a researcher's status and standing through an institution's promotions policies. Knowledge produced through research can inform and legitimate official policies that govern people's lives. In all these ways and more, knowledge is power.

It is precisely because of this close relationship between knowledge and power that runs through all university activities that students, staff and communities need to recognise the potential fault lines that come with doing academic work (teaching, learning, research, and service), whether in psychology or medicine or engineering or law. This book addresses some of these fault lines through key questions of vital importance to every student, such as the following:

- ◆ What is race, where does it come from and is it even real?
- ◆ How does any group come to be a racial problem?
- ◆ Why does race show up as common sense in research?
- ◆ What is different about a critical (rather than essentialist) approach to race and research?
- ◆ Do the (research) facts speak for themselves? And if so, what do they say?
- ◆ What are the ethical foundations of good research on human subjects?
- ◆ Why are (coloured) women negatively presented in research?
- ◆ What does a systems (structural) – rather than a group – analysis of race look like?

This book is not about one published research article or about one university or even about one country. It is about troubling lines of research on race, science and society in South Africa and other parts of the world. The Sport Science article was, after all, accepted for publication in an American online journal that saw no problem with the original submission.

Finally, it is intended that this book be made widely available for undergraduate students as an introduction to race, science and society across all disciplines. It would also be a valuable guide to postgraduate students embarking on research, offering important guard rails for choosing research problems with some degree

of consciousness about the conceptual, the ethical, the procedural and the political when it comes to doing advanced study. The book is, however, written with a much broader audience in mind, so it is meant to be accessible to campuses and communities struggling to make sense of race, science and society in the aftermath of apartheid.