

# Report on a Colloquium Series on Decolonisation and African-centredness in Research, Teaching and Research Dissemination

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The colloquium *Centring Africa in Health and Social Sciences Research and Teaching* was held on May 30, 2017 at the South African Medical Research Council. An original idea of Kopano Ratele and Neziswa Titi of the Transdisciplinary African Psychologies Programme (TAP), a programme that Ratele leads and where Titi's doctoral research is located under the supervision of Ratele. The colloquium was co-hosted with the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC)-UNISA's Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit (VIPRU). TAP is a programme within the Institute for Social and Health Sciences at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

The colloquium, on which we spend the bulk of this report, came to be conceptualised as the beginning of an ongoing series on decolonisation and African-centredness in research, teaching and research dissemination. Partially motivated by university students' demands for the decolonisation of knowledge, the colloquia series is driven by the intention to centre Africa and decolonise health and social science research, teaching and research dissemination. The medium- to long-term goal of TAP to singly or collaboratively provide an opportunity for researchers, teachers, university and science council managers, policymakers, activists, and students to deliberate and vigorously yet openly debate, in light of the calls for decolonisation and transformation, pertinent issues related to knowledge, its making, and its dissemination.

The specific question that stimulated the first colloquium was how Africa is situated in health and social science research, research policy, research funding and teaching. Towards this end, the colloquium brought together researchers, teachers, a politician, practitioners, and students to dialogue on challenges and developments within health and social science teaching, research, research funding and policymaking conducted in diverse settings across Africa. The organisers wanted and provided an opportunity to learn, present, share and question research, policies or their absence, teaching and learning in the context of the persistence of coloniality and epistemic injustice in Africa-related health and social science research. In addition to the major question that urged the colloquium, namely how Africa is situated in health and social science research, research policy, research funding and teaching, the organisers encouraged the participants to grapple with questions such as:

- What epistemological assumptions and biographies do teachers and researchers bring to studies on Africans and classes of African students?
- >> Who and what goals do social and health science studies and courses ultimately serve?
- Does the class, race and gender – meaning how one defines being African – of the teacher and researcher matter?

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Kopano Ratele gave the opening and overview for the day's proceedings. He indicated that the colloquium was intended to address four broad questions:

- a. How are Africans and Africa served by health and social research conducted in Africa and on Africans?
- b. Whose agenda, on the whole, dominates health and social research in Africa?
- c. Whose problems, epistemologies, cultural values, social imaginaries, methods and theories are centred in university health and social science teaching and learning in Africa?
- d. How are students and the continent advantaged or disadvantaged by the way Africa and Africans are situated in the curriculum, teaching and learning?

Prof. Ratele said that the hope carried in these questions was that they would receive some response from the different speakers and the discussions during the day in order to help us to better reflect and determine whether the research we do and the learning provided in our higher institutions incapacitates or builds Africa and Africans. He said the organisers hoped that the invited speakers and discussions would contribute towards determining whether the courses taught at universities optimally address the needs and struggles of Africans and Africa. Moreover, referencing a statement attributed to the minister of higher education and training in the immediate weeks prior to the colloquium, he expressed the hope that the discussions will help us to better reflect on "why we continue to produce so few black PhDs, more than 20 years into our freedom". Ratele contended that in considering the issue of centring Africa in health and social sciences research and teaching, it is inevitable to see that knowledge and its management is dominated by western ideas and white male, and to a lesser degree, white female authors. He said that this places African ideas generally, and Black male and female researchers and teachers in particular, in an inferior position. He noted that there are several ways to respond to being in such an alienating position. Among the ways in which many individuals, groups and organisation in Africa, especially if Black, have responded, has been through adopting and reproducing, for their own individual upward social mobility and self-preservation, acontextual and alienating western and white masculine ideas. This is an unhealthy, enervating and alienating situation. He urged the participants not to waste time mourning but to organise dialogues to change the dominating research and teaching and learning agenda at university and science councils.

The President of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), Prof. Glenda Gray, welcomed the participants to the SAMRC. She observed that VIPRU, the co-host, was the first Unit within the SAMRC to engage in a dialogue on decolonisation in health research. Gray also instructed VIPRU to lead the SAMRC in developing a position paper on decolonisation on behalf of the council, noting that such a document would be a first among science councils.

The member of the executive council for health in the Western Cape Province, Prof. Nomafrench Mbombo, gave a talk reflecting on "health services policies and delivery in the context of calls for decolonisation". Mbombo reflected on training and education within the health professions during apartheid. She gave a broad overview of the categories of health services in the province. She stated that in order for the government to have a focused research agenda, health research institutions must engage government around research findings in order for it to affect the desired health services and practice outcomes.

Dr Thomas Nyirenda of the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership and Zoleka Ngcete of the Strategic Health Innovation Partnerships Grants, Innovation and Product Development at the SAMRC were asked to respond to the question "where and how is Africa and Africans, located in health practice and research?". More specifically, Nyirenda had been asked to speak about how health research practices consider Africa and Africans. Ngcete's question was, in what ways are Africa and Africans situated in applications for study grants? Nyirenda highlighted how Western funders were keen to support research done in Africa but are not always energetic about capacitating researchers in Africa. In her talk, Ngcete drew out how funders support their own agendas; how Africa does not support research on the continent; and how historically black institutions submit proposals for grants and funding less than previously white institutions. She presented data to show that



the former institutions continue to receive far less monetary support when compared to the latter. Suggestions were offered for how to assist historically advantaged institutions and individuals to respond to funding calls. During the discussion on the two presentations, the issue concerning African governments not providing support or its agenda was raised as a critical priority theme for research and research funding.

The mid-morning talks were given by Drs. Wanga Zembe-Mkhabile and Nadine Harker Burnhams, both affiliated to the SAMRC. The focus was on "Africa in research". Zembe-Mkhabile gave a moving talk on the dehumanising effects of some types of research on poor Africans. She frowned upon the experimentation on black people in health research and called for the protection of research participants, especially poor black people. She insisted on the need for research that respects people's dignity and humanity. She said it was time to cease the problematic research done on black people. She highlighted how western models of research could also be self-alienating for junior African researchers as well as injurious to the well-being of participants. In her talk, Dr Harker Burnham made a strong case for mentoring in African scholarship and called for a mind shift among black researchers to view themselves as capable.

The afternoon focused on teaching and learning. Both current students and recently graduated students as well as one experienced university teacher formed part of the teaching and learning session. The students and recently graduated students were Ms Zanele Motsepe, Mr Sisesakhe Ntlabezo and Ms Keitumetse Tsematse. The university lecturer was Prof Sandy Lazarus who was for decades associated with the University of the Western Cape and is currently a researcher at Unisa and the SAMRC.

Motsepe studied education at the University of Witwatersrand. Ntlabezo studied drama at Rhodes University and Tsematse is doing her professional training in psychology at the University of the Western Cape. Although they studied at different universities and had done or were doing different courses of study, Motsepe and Ntlabezo noted that they were taught little to nothing about Africa and Africans in their studies. They reflected on how they were made to feel that intelligence has a colour, how indigenous languages are being undermined, and how for them it is important to speak about blackness. Both, however, indicated that there was complexity around the issues that they grappled to understand. Tsematse confirmed the paucity of in-depth and progressive lessons about Africa and Africans in the curriculum observed by the other two students. She relayed how, in her university education experience, she has only actually seen a total of one and a half pages of African psychology. She stated that even at her stage of training she feels unprepared to deal with African representations of illness.

Sandy Lazarus's reflections dwelt on how to respond to calls for decolonisation of teaching in higher education and related contexts. She contended that a decolonial lens is needed in teaching as well as research and saw participatory methods as necessary in the project of decolonisation.

For the sake of completion, we shall very briefly mention the three other events in the colloquium series. The second colloquium was held in July 2017. The topic of the colloquium was "Decolonisation, pluriversality and African-situated research and advocacy in sexuality and sexuality-related violence". The colloquium addressed several issues confronting researchers and advocates on sexualities and sexual violence who perceive the fact of colonisation in prevailing knowledge, knowledge-making practices, and knowledge dissemination. The presenters at this colloquium were Prof. Yanga Zembe who is affiliated with the School of Public Health at the University of the Western Cape as well as the SAMRC; Floretta Boonzaier, associate professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town (UCT); Dr Shose Kessi, also from UCT's Psychology Department; and Rebecca Helman who is affiliated with the ISHS and VIPRU. The colloquium presentation included a focus on advocacy around sexuality and sexual violence. The presentation on advocacy was by Mr Mbuyiselo Botha, a member of the Commission for Gender Equality. Some of the issues addressed were how to share the knowledge and conceptual tools with the greatest number of people in order to enable them to live with dignity; how to conduct work that emboldens women, men and other genders of all sexualities to assert control over their bodies and decide on their desires and how to conduct research and advocacy that humanises rather than exploits.



Decolonisation, Dignity, Humanisation: African-situated Research, Teaching and Learning in Health Sciences was the subject of the third colloquium. This colloquium was held at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) on August 08, 2017, and was a collaboration among TAP, VIPRU, and UKZN's College of Health Sciences' Deanery of Teaching & Learning, in particular Professor Sinegugu Duma. The Colloquium revolved around the question: what does decolonisation mean for health sciences' research, teaching and learning practice? The aim was to bring together health science researchers, academics, students and practitioners to deliberate and challenge each other on situating Africa and Africans in health sciences research, teaching and learning towards development of African-centred health scholarship and systems. The colloquium provided space to consider how we might enact dignity and humanisation in the work of decolonising health science teaching, learning and research.

In September 2017, a symposium – so called because it was within a larger conference which other symposia – entitled "Conceiving Africa in Psychology" was held as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Pan-African Psychologies Congress by staff at TAP and VIPRU. The symposium offered African centred theoretical approaches to the professional development of psychologists in Africa, teaching, therapy and research, modes of reflexivity and a centered understanding of culture in relation to child sexual trauma. The symposium panelists were Lazarus, Prof. Shahnaz Suffla, Titi and Ratele.

Proceedings of the colloquia can be viewed on the African Psychologies YouTube channel. Future colloquia and other events are advertised through the African Psychologies Facebook page ([facebook.com/centringafrika](https://facebook.com/centringafrika)) and African Psychologies Twitter account (@centringafrika).

