



Expression of concern (4 June 2021)

To the Editor: We are writing to you on behalf of Stellenbosch University (SU)'s Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE), to express our deep concern at an article published in the April 2021 edition of your journal entitled 'Critiquing the ethics review process in the 2019 Nieuwoudt *et al.* study on the impact of age and education on cognitive functioning among coloured South African women.'^[1] While we welcome robust criticism of and debate on our review process and decisions as part of an ethical engagement with scholars, we are alarmed that the authors of the article did not consult the public record on the case, nor did they approach the REC: SBE about it. They indeed state that since the Nieuwoudt *et al.* application to the REC was not made public, 'the arguments presented in this article, therefore, are based on the assumption that the study and the resulting article were consistent with the submission made in the ethics application.'^[1]

The authors thus relied on erroneous assumptions about the process we followed in the ethical review of the research on which the article, 'Age and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women'^[2] was based. In particular, the authors concluded that the REC:

'should have considered this study unapprovable, as its methodology was based on racist assumptions, and its focus on a single race group posed a social risk for that community. Furthermore, the methodological flaws of the study introduced scientific bias, and it should also have not been approved on those grounds. The ethics committee ought to have interrogated researchers' use of race as a variable. Limiting enrolment to participants who self-identified as coloured was scientifically invalid, as there was no biological basis for such an approach. Nor was there a control group against which to compare study findings. In this instance, researchers were wanting to study a biological phenomenon (cognitive functioning) in a population that does not exist from a biological perspective – a point both Nieuwoudt *et al.*^[1] and the REC failed to recognise. Furthermore, the researchers and the REC did not consider the complicated history of racial stereotyping regarding colouredness, and this resulted in social harm to the participants. Concepts of coloureds as being of mixed race and therefore deviant, as well as cognitively deficient and lazy, were perpetuated by this study.'^[1]

We would like to refer you to the public statement^[3] that Prof. Eugene Cloete, the SU Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, made on 12 June 2020 after a thorough investigation was launched on various aspects of the controversial article in question, including the ethical review process followed. We would like to draw your attention to the following portions of the public statement in particular, which specifically address the questions of the study's racial and methodological flaws, and the REC's review of it:

'At the time, SU apologised unconditionally^[4] for the trauma caused to various stakeholders, while the article was retracted – a step strongly supported by SU.^[5] Various parties asked why the university's REC did not pick up on the contents of the article, and was hence implied as not doing its job with the necessary

care. The REC does not have jurisdiction over the publication of articles, and assumes that researchers act in accordance with the approved protocol and are guided by the ethical guidelines of the discipline and the journal. A Formal Investigation Committee (FIC) was therefore appointed to investigate various aspects related to the article. The FIC concluded that the article was not aligned with the Research Ethics Committee (REC) approved protocol. While the research methodology submitted for the purpose of ethical clearance was compatible with the stated aims and objectives of the research project, the eventual published article was NOT based on the appropriate methodology to make population-based inferences about '[C]oloured South African women'. The FIC furthermore concluded that there had been no indication to the REC that the results of the study would be presented in terms of racial generalisations, and they had not approved the study as such. This exonerated the REC from any wrongdoing and/or negligence.'

In short, we find ourselves accused of having approved a racist and methodologically deeply flawed study, with no factual substantiation from our accusers. The evidentiary bar in scholarly work needs to be set higher than accepting assumptions about an organisation or a process, especially when public records exist that counter such assumptions and where a simple enquiry to the accused organisation could have corrected any misconceptions. We would like your journal to publish a correction based on the facts of the matter (and the review of the REC's role in the Nieuwoudt *et al.* 2019 article).

Prof. Len Hansen

Chair REC: SBE

Prof. Ilana van Wyk

Vice-Chair REC: SBE

Mrs Maléne Fouché

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3. Cloete E. Update on outcome of formal investigation: 'The Article' 2020. <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/Lists/news/DispForm.aspx?ID=7426> (accessed 10 June 2021).
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