

Chapter 16

The Ambit of Ethics in the South African Academic Institutions: Experience of Coloniality

Xolani Mathews Shange

University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The chapter examines possible use of instruments and processes such as ethical clearance in the institutions of higher learning as subtle means of perpetuating inequality and racial prejudice towards the indigenous people of South Africa who had recently emerged from the scourge of apartheid with a hope of democracy ultimately providing not only freedom of association and speech, but also intellectual freedom. Freedom to produce African-based knowledge by Black African intellectuals pursuing their postgraduate studies and academics whose careers are at formative stages. However, their vision of becoming producers of African Indigenous knowledge is thwarted by subtle and invisible activities that are aimed at perpetuate coloniality in the higher institutions of learning. Sadly, ethical clearance process has possibly been utilized to derail research outputs that some of the old guard from historically white universities are uncomfortable to witness, thus continuing to maintain the colonial status quo.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa was the last country to obtain independence in Africa and the universities underwent changes through the colonial, apartheid and the democratic era. In each period, they had found themselves influenced by the political system of the moment. In particular, colonising forces in the past centuries utilised the South African system of education to engrain a narrow cultural perspective (Beckmann, 2016; Do Vale, 2016, p.600) and in the process propagating racial inequality especially in universities. The existence of colonialism and apartheid became a root course of alienating black African students and academics from academia. The situation has been overturned to consider approaches that include rather than excludes various inhabitants of South Africa, especially in accessibility and academic freedom.

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There was also recognition that such participation should not only include black students and women but to also guarantee successful outcomes (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007, p.386). However, there seem to be continuous lack of political will to transform not only the curriculum of the universities, but also the inclusion of African ethics in the educational landscape. Collins and Millard (2013) contend that it is unwarranted for the historical disadvantaged communities to be assimilated into a system that overlooks their cultural values. Therefore, there should be transformation of the education system in order to entrench relevance to the goals of a democratic South Africa (Pinar, 2009, p.318). Although promotion of education for all has been pronounced, the higher education system continues to be engulfed with black African student higher dropout (Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2009, p.260) and failure rate coupled with ethical and moral practices as well as standards that are not embracing African values. Meanwhile African governments and institutions have lost their morality and are torn apart by structured inequality and are deeply polarized along ideological, religious, racial, gender and ethnic lines (Suda, 1996, p.72). The situation warrants for stakeholders in education and government institutions to deeply reflect on concrete strategies to entrench sound and liberatory education system for all inhabitants (Beckmann, 2016, p.289; Do Vale, 2016, p.593).

This chapter postulates that ethical research aspects at South African universities derive their practices from the colonial Eurocentric philosophy which continue to co-exist through coloniality and disregard for the African context, norms, values and practices. As Cloete & Auriacombe (2019) concur that “*colonial values and mental models were introduced in educational institutions and processes, in most cases as formal substitutes for pre-colonial values and mental models*”. Furthermore, the African countries’ research ethics standards have been largely influenced by the internationalisation of research through colonialist history (Ndebele et al, 2014, p.4). In further analysing this matter, an uBuntu framework will be highlighted to reflect on the limitations of Western ethical theory and methods while highlighting strengths of the indigenous knowledge related ethical research aspects (Peltier, 2018, p.2) so as to critically analyse ethical research issues in the South African universities.

BACKGROUND

Apartheid policy reigned in the South African education system, with a skewed curriculum that accommodated only white minority cultural values (Kallaway, 2002, p.2). Blacks were furnished with inferior education to ensure they remained unskilled and semi-skilled workforce (Kallaway, 2002, p.12; Hale, 2010, p.8) of which at a later stage they would uplift the white capitalist economy through provision of hard labour. The few black people who made it to the university level could be admitted at historically white university colleges while they required permission from the minister to be enrolled at the historically white universities (Beale, 1998, p.2). However, the universities were under close watch of the repressive regime such that the right to academic freedom was suppressed not only for the black African scholars and students, but for all races. In 1700s there was concerted effort by the Dutch authorities in South Africa to prevent perceived subversive publication to be published (Delmas, 2011, p.116). The British suspended publications of material considered as of political nature a century later (Oliphant, 2000, p.11).

The apartheid government intervened in universities to counter the emergence of political resistance to the apartheid policy and therefore invoked censorship legislation. As a result, several universities were controlled by the Broederbond leading to government intervention in preventing employment of some black academics. For instance, in, 1968 the University of Cape Town prevented appointment in

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