ETHICS GUIDELINES: “RACE” AS A RESEARCH VARIABLE ¹

Document compiled by Dr WA Hoffmann, Chair: TUT Research Ethics Committee.

Date: 12 January 2011

Note: This document is intended as a guideline document for internal use by researchers of the Tshwane University of Technology. It does not represent any form of formal policy/position statement about the topic by the TUT Research Ethics Committee.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. “Race” is very often included in the demographics section of research interviews and/or questionnaires as either a close-ended imposed category item or an open-ended self-identification item. However, this is often done without any evidence-based justification to include it as a valid research variable. This practice is also seemingly ignorant of the historic divisive role of “race” in South Africa.

2. Racial identity, specifically when self-identified, is primarily a social construct. In this regard, race is not about skin colour (anatomical characteristic), but more about an experience in the particular context. As such, it is important to recognise that “race” is often an introjected concept and identification factor.

¹ This document has been compiled from the SAREC Newsletter (Vol 7, No 1, November 2010) and personal notes taken at the 8th IRENSA Research Ethics Seminar, 6 Sep 2010. The document represents my interpretation of the presentations by the following persons: Prof Vicky Lambert (MRC/UCT Research Unit for Exercise & Sports Medicine); Prof Marc Blockman (Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee, UCT); Prof Alan Morris (Dept of Human Biology, UCT); Prof Raj Ramesar (Head, Division of Human Genetics Research Unit, UCT); Prof Leslie London (Director, School of Public Health and Family Medicine); Prof David Benatar (Deputy Director, Bioethics Centre, UCT); Prof Anton van Niekerk (Director, Centre for Applied Ethics, Stellenbosch University).
3. Race/ethnicity is a complex interplay of many factors – ancestry, social, economic, environmental, biological and genetic factors.

4. Biological concepts should not be regarded or used in isolation as they often carry a lot cultural meanings, social intentions, personal/social implications and interpretations. This makes these biological concepts often “fuzzy” and not as clear-cut as the researcher thinks and/or wants it to be.

5. Categorisation is used in research to generalise knowledge and information. It is important to keep in mind that this focuses away from an individual perspective and appreciation. As such, racial categories are very crude and generally fail to distinguish sufficiently between groups. In other words, race is often merely a crude marker of participant characteristics. This problematises the application of research results in a meaningful way since it imposes ethically unjust categories on the research participants. Individuals are then treated/seen by others in a stereotypical way based on the group they’ve been assigned/classified into. It results in an ethically unfair and stereotyped view that is largely impersonal and unjust. It may even discriminate against or in favour of specific individuals with an uncommon need.

6. Anthropological perspective:
   a. “Race” is a strict biological construct that refers to Caucasoid, Negroid, Mongoloid, Australoid and New World Mongoloid typological categories.
   b. “Ethnicity”, “class” and/or “caste” are cultural constructs based on socially defined groups.
   c. “Community” refers to a shared residential location.
   d. “Sex” is a biological construct that refers to male and female individuals.
   e. “Gender” is a social construct that refers to circumscribed behavioural patterns.

7. Genetic perspective:
   a. There is no gene or collection of genes that determine a specific “race”, “class” or “caste”.
   b. Genetic variations in global sub-populations are based on environmental influences on the expression of genes. However, the genome of all individuals world-wide is remarkably similar.
   c. Genomic racial distinctions are not scientifically meaningful.

EVALUATING THE JUSTIFICATION/S FOR USING “RACE” AS RESEARCH VARIABLE

1. All the research-based intentions, widespread social consequences and legitimacy of racial categories/identities in research proposals need to be closely scrutinised and evaluated. As such, researchers need to engage in conversations and dialogues with peers and/or community members with a focus on openness to listen and learn from others.
2. “Race” is sometimes used as proxy variable for socio-economic status, genetic origin and/or cultural context. In such cases, items regarding socio-economic status, cultural context and other variables should rather be explicitly included in the research design; “race” and other demographic characteristics (e.g. socio-economic status, home language) can not be regarded as directly comparable and/or interchangeable variables.

3. Sample selection in research:
   a. What does the demographics categories mean in the context of the specific project? What does “White”, “Black”, “Indian” or “Coloured” mean? What is a “South African”, “Muslim”, etc? What does a specific population term mean; for example “African” means different things in different communities. Keep in mind that demographic categories are often imposed by the researcher onto the participant population. Consider asking “How do you self-identify?” instead of “What race group do you belong to?”
   b. What does the sample represent? Is it perhaps more important to interrogate where the sample comes from in terms of geography and socio-economic status?
   c. Does the researcher confuse “race” and “ethnicity”?

4. Including/excluding race as a demographic variable:
   a. What is the risk/benefit ratio of including/excluding race as a variable in the project?
   b. Has other variables (e.g. socio-economic status, age, gender, geography) been considered other than “race”?
   c. Are the assigned race names (e.g. “Black”, “African”, “White”) acceptable/preferable for the participants themselves?

**PRAGMATIC GUIDELINE**

1. Clearly define and justify all the demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, race, ethnicity, literacy level, monthly income, employment status) to be used in the research project. This will minimise misunderstanding and misconceptions.
2. The arguments for the inclusion/exclusion of race as research variable in a specific project must be of such a nature that it can be repeated and/or defended in public and still be regarded as logical and ethically acceptable.
3. Use race, ethnicity and/or gender as a research variables only when such data is directly relevant to the study.
4. The documentation of “race” using a 4-option tick box in SA is unacceptable.