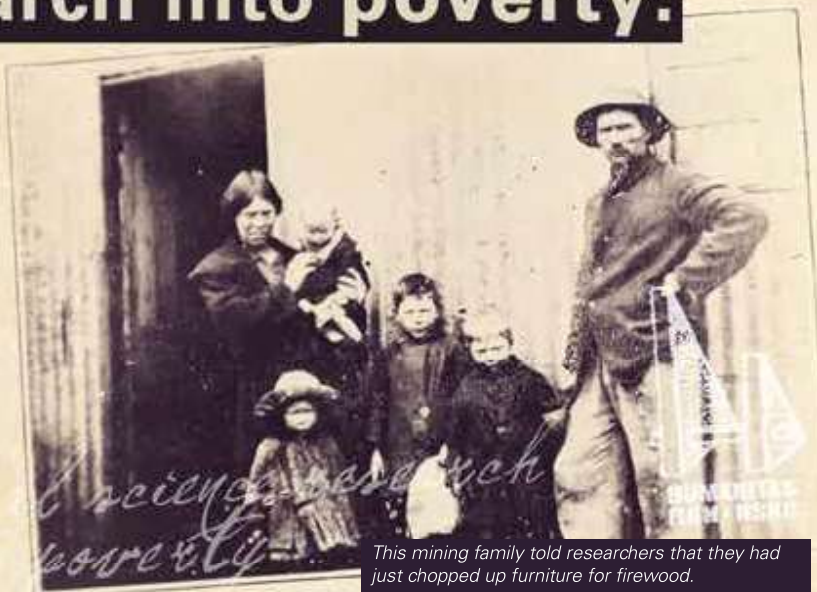


NINETY YEARS of social science research into poverty:

Revisiting the HSRC and the Carnegie Commission

The Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem in South Africa released its five-volume report in 1932, a project in which the precursor organisation to the HSRC, the National Bureau of Education and Social Research (NBESR), played a major role. As the first initiative of the Carnegie Corporation's study on poverty, the commission focused on poor Afrikaners in rural areas. The findings urged the government to improve the conditions of whites, focusing on improved education. It is important to take a wide-eyed view of the story of the commission and the role of social sciences research in policymaking, writes *Prof. Crain Soudien, HSRC CEO.*



This mining family told researchers that they had just chopped up furniture for firewood.

'n Delwersgesin. Die vader het so pas die stoeltjie van die babetjie opgekap vir brandhout,— die laaste wat hulle had.

In reflecting on the 90-year history of the HSRC, which dates back to 1929 with the formation of the National Bureau of Education and Social Research (NBESR), it is more than an interesting curiosity that its concern with poverty was a focus from the start. Ninety years later, in 2019, the central focus of the organisation is once again on poverty and inequality. The importance of its earlier concern with poverty is the way it comes to play a role in, and influence, a number of features of research practice in South Africa and the critical relationship between science and the state. It established the place of methodological positivism – a reliance on scientific evidence – in the research community and it addressed the issue of race as the signature question of the social sciences. This article looks at the story of the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Question and argues that it helps to determine the direction of the social sciences and its practical uses, in the field of policymaking in South Africa, in deeply important ways.

How the relationship happens between people in the knowledge community – in universities, research institutions and in the government – and between the researchers and the world of politics, is never straightforward. We must not be either naïve or biased in trying to explain these relationships. They were always messy and contested and involved large-scale political and economic interests but also involved individuals with both deeply altruistic dispositions and venal intentions, a motley assemblage of good and bad people.

A plea for 'genuine science'

Giving direction to the times were far-sighted individuals and communities of people. These included the first director of the NBESR, Dr Ernest Malherbe. In the late 1920s, as a young social scientist, trained at Teachers' College, Columbia University in the United States, he believed the policy-making process in South Africa was deeply flawed. The core of the problem was the



A group of poor children with their teacher in the former Transvaal

'n Groep arm kinders met hulle onderwyser in die malaria-streek in die Transvaal by hulle skoolgebou.

dominance of commissions of inquiry, which took years to complete their tasks and produced unreadable reports. What was needed, he argued in an unpublished letter, was genuine science. "What we want is action, not mere sporadic outbursts ... sustained action based on scientific methods and principles... finding out the best possible way of doing a thing and then doing it that way." To realise this 'best way', he urged, South Africa needed to establish national research institutes. The young man's views were heard, and in 1929 the then Minister of Education, Dr DF Malan, established the NBESR, the forerunner organisation of the HSRC. Malherbe is best known for his magisterial study on the history of education in South Africa and for becoming the rector of the University of Natal. But his most important contribution, as the first director of the NBESR, was helping to set the agenda for social policy-making in South Africa and the social sciences through his leading role in the Carnegie Commission.

Obtaining a research grant

The Carnegie Commission included the participation of researchers from Stellenbosch University, but was conceptualised and driven by Malherbe. He met with the president of the Carnegie Corporation, and also his former dean at Teacher's College,

Dr Frederick Paul Keppel, who was on a visit to South Africa. They discussed how the corporation's special fund for the dominions and colonies could be spent. Malherbe had shared with him an article he had written many years earlier in which he explained, "Today we have over 100,000 so-called 'Poor Whites'. They are becoming a menace to the self-preservation and prestige of our White people, living as we do in the midst of the native population which outnumbers us five to one. We shall never solve the Poor White problem adequately until we get thorough and first-hand knowledge of the causes underlying this malady – the cumulative result of some maladjustment in our society in the past." Out of that discussion, the corporation agreed to fund a comprehensive study on the poor white question.

As a leading member of the commission, Malherbe was influential in structuring the study, which covered economic, psychological, educational, health and sociological aspects, and he took charge of the educational portion himself.

The importance of good knowledge

Many formative social sciences approaches and practices came

out of the study, two of which are of critical significance. The first is methodological, which relates to the importance of good knowledge to policy formation. Central here is the idea of science – Malherbe's concern with the 'best possible way' of coming to understand a problem. The second is conceptual, and has to do principally with what, in discussions of research methodology, might be described as 'the unit of analysis' – what or who the subject of the research is. The 'unit of analysis' in the Carnegie Commission was 'race', in this case, the segment of the population thought of as 'poor' and 'white'.

With respect to the first, the methodological, Malherbe affirmed for the social sciences in South Africa the significance and pre-eminence of 'experts' and 'expert-driven' knowledge. While he was by no means the first to put in front of the South African public the idea of 'rigorous science', it was what he and the NBESR and his Stellenbosch colleagues put into practice that established the credibility, legitimacy and, in the end, the unquestioned superiority of the 'scientific method' in social science practice and its standing for the making of social policy. Trained at Columbia, Malherbe was a direct product and, as a result, a proponent of the global shift towards science and technology.

The social survey

Prof. Brahm Fleisch, a scholar of Malherbe, says, "His conception of science was similar to that of Edward Thorndike, unapologetically empiricist and positivist."

Science would make the world a better place. Through the Carnegie Commission, the practice of the social survey was instituted. Malherbe developed statistical databases, looking at the relationship between poverty and failure, retardation and drop-out rates, the relationships between family size and educational attainment and the intelligence of the 'poor white'. He also introduced, for the first time in South Africa, intelligence tests – IQ tests. These would remain as powerful markers in the making of sociology and psychology in South Africa. What mattered to Malherbe was what he saw as *the facts*.

A focus on race



A poor rural family

Because of its authority and political significance, the Carnegie Commission helped to set the discourse for sociology, psychology, philosophy, criminology, anthropology and a whole range of social sciences disciplines and fields of study. It did so through specifying what needed to be made sense of, in this case, white poverty. The exercise affirmed the priority of 'race' over all other ways in which poverty could be approached. It made 'race' the question that needed to be understood. All Malherbe's

major preoccupations, in the wake of this, were conditioned by this signifying focus, most emphatically his and the NBESR's work on intelligence. In his study of white intelligence, Malherbe concluded that the poor scholastic performance of his poor white subjects was due to social rather than genetic factors. This was a crucial moment in the history of raciology in South Africa. Fleisch would say of this development that it would become "a characteristic trade mark of the research conducted under the auspices of the Bureau" - racial identity. It was more than that. It specified for the whole social science community what 'good' research would need to explain. It foregrounded the orientations and approaches taken by the largely English-speaking white South African Institute of Race Relations, the Rasseverhoudingsbond, the Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasseaangeleenthede and many other similar bodies. It also influenced the curricula for the departments of sociology, social work, criminology and psychology developing throughout the country. At the core of this was what researchers Drs Shireen Ally, Katie Mooney and Paul Stewart describe as a sociological imagination – "a preoccupation with prejudice and social pathology".

The Carnegie Commission promoted the importance of good knowledge. But it did so in a blinkered way, overwhelmed by the racial interests of the time. Ninety years on, poverty and inequality remain our central problems. But we need more searching, self-aware and inclusive approaches to explain them.

Author: Prof. Crain Soudien, HSRC CEO



Children who participated in intelligence tests



Dr Ernest Malherbe, director of the National Bureau of Educational and Social Research (1929 - 1939)

“THE COMMISSION PROMOTED THE IMPORTANCE OF **GOOD KNOWLEDGE**, BUT IT DID SO IN A BLINKERED WAY, **OVERWHELMED BY THE RACIAL INTERESTS OF THE TIME.**”

CARNEGIE FINDINGS:

A strong emphasis on education

Researchers travelled across South Africa in 1929 – 1930, gathering information about poor white people, mostly from landless Afrikaners in rural areas. The findings and recommendations are contained in a five-volume report, with an executive summary of 124 points. The need for better education and skills development was particularly emphasised.

- Some older white people struggled to adjust to modern economic conditions and clung to outdated, inefficient farming methods. Many were inadequately educated and spoke insufficient English, increasingly the language of towns, commerce and industry. Sixty-six percent of “European children” in South Africa did not proceed beyond standard 6 (grade 8), extending to 90% in economically poor environments.
- The commission recommended that education be improved, and compulsory up to 15 years, to increase “the holding power of the school on the type of child who can benefit from further school education”. Children needed to read better, and farmers needed to know how to perform calculations to farm more profitably. Teachers also needed to be trained differently, as they often lacked knowledge of the country’s sociological and economic problems, rendering them “unable to interpret life for the child”.
- Many poor whites did not learn the skills to work in industry or had to compete with “cheap native labour”. Better coordination of vocational teaching and practical education would help them find jobs in towns and cities.
- On the protection of poor whites through temporary job reservation, the commission warned it would be disastrous if it “impairs his ability to compete with the non-European on the labour market”.
- The commission found that dependence had been created, especially on the state. It warned against assistance given in a way that demoralised poor whites. This would cause a loss of independence “and may imbue them with a sense of inferiority, impair their industry [and] weaken their sense of personal responsibility”.
- Many poor whites lived in overcrowded dwellings, and poor sanitation and diet endangered their health. The commission recommended increased state support for their housing, and that women be trained about food choices and encouraged to start vegetable gardens.
- The commission found that scientific study on ways to assist the poor was lacking. It recommended that a state bureau of social welfare be created to cooperate with universities to further the scientific study and treatment of social questions.



Researchers and the vehicles in which they travelled



Children transported to school

Primitiewe manier waarop kinders na skool vervoer word. (Noord-Transvaal)



A hartebees house

Die „hartebees-huis.”



Die Trekker in Boesmansfontein Die trekker se vrou.

A poor couple in the Northern Cape