

Covid-19: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Impacts on Higher Education

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GENDER JUSTICE, SOCIAL COHESION, THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND COVID-19

Opportunities and challenges for higher education

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Introduction

Wolhuter and Chigisheva (2020) point out that the world is rapidly changing in terms of its demographics, socio-economic dynamics, and political aspects. These changes, they argue, have wide ranging consequences for scholarship, including thematic and methodological research areas for the social sciences. The Covid-19 pandemic has created unparalleled life and death challenges worldwide that was largely unanticipated. Moodley, Obasa and London (2020) assert that South Africa is currently in the midst of an unprecedented public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus. The response by governments the world over, including South Africa, has been to draw on the expertise of their most esteemed medical and public health experts. Dworkin (2020) comments that it is appropriate that the medical profession is “running the show” but succinctly points out that the humanities should be brought on board as they will prevent some “traps that they might do well to avoid”.

In South Africa, the Academy of Science (ASSAf) recognised and congratulated the government on its response but cautioned that the challenge is not only medical, but social and thus social science and humanities academics should be members of the structures which advises government. The crucial role of the social sciences has also been pointed out by the South African National Institute for the Humanities and

Social Sciences (NIHSS, 2020). The organisation has stated that the spread of the Covid-19 virus has presented an incomparable challenge for society, academia and the social sciences. Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, Tracey, Wessely, Arseneault, Ballard, Christensen, Silver, Everall and Ford (2020) specifically state that it is evident that the direct and indirect psychological and social effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are pervasive. The NIHSS (2020) also notes, as has the ASSAF, that the medical and scientific establishment have been mobilised rapidly to respond to the outbreak, but discussions pertaining to the roles and impacts on the social sciences are subdued and ancillary to scientific concerns.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed an unequal world where the majority of the world's population are socio-economically and politically vulnerable. However, women, as in other pandemics, are particularly vulnerable to the health and social consequences of the virus. We write this chapter as South Africa's cases of persons diagnosed with Covid-19 are spiking and gendered data in terms of cases diagnosed and deaths are not always available. However, global data seems to indicate that more men seem to be dying from the virus, but no conclusions or generalisations can be made at this point. One cannot only look at male deaths in relation to the virus and conclude that men are more affected because of biology. Again, as in previous pandemics, women are integral as frontline workers in caring for patients as 70% of the world's health care workers are female and 80% of the world's nurses are women. In addition, women are carers not only on the frontline, but are also carers and frontline workers at home (Turquet & Koissy-Kpein, 2020).

Another consequence of the pandemic has been the rise of gender-based violence globally and in South Africa. In South Africa, the thousands of calls to help lines are indicative of the violence and we have also seen a number of murders of women. It has been argued that women are trapped in homes with their abusive partners and are thus fighting a pandemic within a pandemic. Women in higher education are part of homes and communities and they are thus affected by these gendered challenges. It is important to note in relation to the pandemic that of the 381 million care workers globally 65.3% are female and 34.7% are male. The latter figures do not include women who are responsible for care in the home as unpaid workers and in a time such as the current pandemic, their unpaid labour in the household would increase. Oosthuizen (2018) has indicated that women still do the majority of unpaid care work. One can also assume that with the lockdown and children not attending school, the need to support learning activities from home has created another job for many women and data is needed to understand how this impacts their professional position and output, as well as their physical and mental health.

Aims of the chapter

This chapter examines the role that the social sciences and humanities can play to ensure that Covid-19 impacts, which are complex and multidimensional, are sufficiently researched. The argument is made that the contributions of the humanities and social sciences should be integrated into research, policy, interventions, and curricula. The chapter thus interrogates the role which the social sciences and humanities can have in terms of various and varied responses to the pandemic. We also argue that the pandemic affects women differently and that researchers, irrespective of discipline, will not be successful in terms of interventions, both medical and social, if interventions are gender neutral. Our position is that this is a moment for the social sciences and humanities as equal partners with the medical sciences to mainstream gender justice interventions in curriculum, research, and engagement. We draw on secondary sources, as well as primary research undertaken to assess the environment for social science research in South Africa prior to the pandemic. In relation to the primary research, pertinent results are presented from a Global Development Network (GDN) funded project that the authors were involved in (Potgieter, Bob & Sooryamoorthy, 2016).

State of social sciences prior to the pandemic: Key trends and issues

The progression of a critical social sciences research tradition in South Africa correlates with struggles against colonial and apartheid rule, as well as rebuilding a transformational and socially responsive post-apartheid nation. The social utility of the social sciences was also highlighted in the GDN study, particularly in relation to the social sciences driving policy critique and development in South Africa, as well as dealing with national challenges such as transformation and empowerment, vulnerabilities and social unrest.

The most recent Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2020) research report indicates a diverse higher education landscape in terms of outputs with some universities that are highly research prolific (generally the historically advantaged white universities or recently merged universities). The report also reveals trends that show a growth in research output units per university and nationally.

The social sciences and humanities include the following classification of education subject matter (CESM) categories: visual and performing arts; communication, journalism, and related studies; education; family ecology and consumer sciences; languages, linguistics, and literature; law; philosophy, religion and theology; psychology; public management and services; and social sciences. The social sciences

and humanities made up 29.6% of the journal research output units in 2018 (a decline from 32% in 2016), 81.2% in relation to book publications and 15% for published conference proceedings. Journal articles made up 77.2% of the total research output units followed by conference proceedings (14.7%) and book contributions (8.1%). The dominance of types of research outputs where science contributions are more discernible is evident. While the report does not disaggregate data specifically in relation to the social sciences, it is important to note that social sciences generally include education and psychology (Molotja & Ralphs, 2018).

Specifically, Molotja and Ralphs (2018) state that the social sciences include accounting; anthropology, archaeology, and history; architecture and habitat; economics; education; emerging issues; finance; geography; law; management studies; media and communication studies; political sciences and public policy; population studies; psychology; sociology; technology management; tourism and transportation studies. They further indicate that the humanities encompass arts and culture; dances; historical and civilisation studies; languages and literature; music; philosophy and religious studies. The dominance of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields in relation to research outputs in South Africa is evident in the report and correlates with global trends. The overall proportionate decline in social science and humanities research is not recent since the ASSAf (2011) found that close to a decade ago, the humanities and the social sciences constituted 38% of the annual total research output in South Africa.

The research output trends are also reflected in research funding for the social sciences. For example, the Department of Science and Technology (DST, 2012) noted that what government and higher education institutions spend on social sciences research and development at local, provincial, and national levels was 18.5% and 20%, respectively, with the rest of the investments in STEM fields. The DST (2012) indicates that when not-for-profit and business sector research and development funding is included, the picture worsens with more than 87% of expenditure allocated to natural sciences, engineering, and technology fields and only 12.5% was allocated to the social sciences. The GDN (2016) project revealed that the social sciences in South Africa (as is the case with most research), with the exception of health sciences and physical sciences which attracts substantial international funding, relies heavily on national funding. Social sciences research is also primarily concentrated in universities and research councils/centres/institutes.

As discussed earlier, these institutions have played a major role in championing the role that the social sciences can play in dealing with the pandemic, as well as initialising national research projects. The findings also reveal that the social sciences

are contributing substantially to research outputs in South Africa. However, this is not matched with corresponding funding, which is disproportionately biased towards the STEM disciplines, including the natural, physical, and medical sciences (DST, 2012).

In addition to competing from a disadvantaged position for funding, within the social sciences, some disciplines have limited funding opportunities. The latter will be worsened under the current conditions where funding is shrinking and shifting to address the more direct and prioritised needs associated with dealing with the pandemic. Disciplinary differences in funding are also evident within the social sciences and humanities. For example, Molotja and Ralphs' (2018) analysis of patterns of research and development expenditure in social sciences and humanities research fields over the period 2005/2006-2014/2015 show expenditure in the 10-year reference period was targeted predominantly within just a few research fields (specifically, finance, economics, education, accounting, political science, and public policy). They found that funding in architecture and habitat, media and communication studies, psychology and transportation studies was strikingly low in the same period, and some research fields (such as dance or tourism) showed signs of being at risk of decline.

Additionally, preconceptions about the value of research and outputs which, according to Fitzpatrick and Kennison (2017), influence performance management, promotions and resource allocation persists, with lower rates of support for social scientists in terms of mentoring and networking. Similar findings to the GDN study were articulated in an earlier study by Mouton (2011) who also assessed the state of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa. Mouton (2011) found that systematic biases in the national science and higher education system tend to constrain, weaken and disadvantage the humanities and social sciences in relation to funding, publication support, expenditure on research and development and reward systems.

Li and Li (2015) examine co-authorship patterns of China's humanities and social sciences by assessing articles and reviews included in the Social Science Citation Index and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index of the Web of Science which have lessons for South Africa. Their findings were similar to trends in South Africa with most of the publications having no collaboration.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the social sciences and humanities

Funding for social science and humanities research in South Africa also reveals what we see as intra-disciplinary biases. Certain disciplines have more funding than others. Fields such as education, political science, public police and accounting receive much more funding than media studies, psychology, architecture and transportation studies (Molotja & Ralphs, 2018).

In terms of the pandemic, the disciplines which need funding to assist with non-pharmaceutical responses to the pandemic are the disciplines like psychology and transportation studies which have in the past received low research and development investments. Potgieter et al. (2016) further note that the social sciences in South Africa depend on international donors such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), governments in Europe, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada; and various foundations in the United States of America (USA), notably Rockefeller, Mellon, Kellogg and Carnegie. All organisations are experiencing pressures to survive and prioritise funding directly to the health impacts of the pandemic. It is hoped that funding for the social sciences and humanities will not decrease because of funding for health-related disciplines, but that there will be a “balance” of funding between social sciences and humanities and health as the pandemic needs inter-disciplinary research and interventions.

An important aspect which emerged from the GDN study is that while the amount of funding available for the social sciences is lower than for STEM, the availability of funding is not the main issue, but the ability of social scientists to access funding is. Our concern is that this may again be the case for research linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is too early for any assessment and it is an area which we will monitor closely. This is an important issue since, while major concerns are being raised about decreases in funding (which is likely to be of concern for most disciplines except those directly linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the health sciences), there has been an increase in opportunities to respond to calls for proposals to undertake Covid-19 related research. Future research should examine the extent to which the social sciences benefitted from these funding opportunities.

As indicated earlier, the social sciences are made up of a range of different disciplines and focus areas. It is critical that these differences are understood to refrain from generalisations, which the social sciences are generally cautious of since there is recognition of context-specific dynamics. Thus, the short and long-term impacts of

the pandemic on the social sciences (including research outputs and productivity) are likely to be differentiated. Specifically, those disciplines that utilise desktop study approaches, rely on secondary data sources (including large datasets such as census and geospatial data) and can shift from face-to-face to online/non-contact forms of primary data collection are likely to be minimally negatively impacted by the pandemic and may even see an increase in research. Non-contact-based approaches to data collection is also less costly and time consuming. It is important to note, however, that there are several limitations of relying almost solely on non-contact types of approaches to undertake social science research which can undermine the quality and integrity of the research endeavour.

Quality issues around research go beyond the research methodological constraints that social distancing pose for the social sciences, which are often field-based and include interactions with people. Social science research, in particular that which is generally not numeric based (although many social scientists have statistical and numerical data analytical skills), embraces engagement, debate, reflection, feedback and dissension of ideas. Online engagements as currently available are not always conducive to these types of interactions. This may further impinge on the quality of the graduates being trained under these conditions and the research outputs.

There is considerable concern that as research priorities and funding shift, disciplinary biases as noted in the previous section will be reinforced. However, this can be short-sighted and failing to address persistent societal challenges which have not subsided and, in many cases the pandemic responses have reinforced, will result in longer term health and economic impacts which could be more costly. What is required is a re-examination of how research is done to foster collaboration and partnerships to continue, and even upscale, social science research in specific areas that can have long-term positive impacts, as well as inform Covid-19 responses and measures. The benefits of a gendered social science lens to inform research in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is therefore discussed in the next section.

Taking stock: Academic labour, gender justice and Covid-19

Van Rooyen and Zulu (2018) point out that of the 3 392 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researchers in 2016 in the South African system, a mere 31% were women. Stated differently, 69% of NRF rated researchers in 2016 were men. In addition, 74% of rated researchers were white and the obvious conclusion is that the majority were white males. Van Rooyen and Zulu (2018) also indicate that there was an increase in women academics from 40.8% in 2009/2010 to 44% in 2013/2014. However, although the number of black women (African, coloured and Indian) are

increasing in academia, in 2012, African women reflected 9% of the overall number of women professors and 2% of all professors (Van Rooyen & Zulu, 2018). In the article, Van Rooyen and Zulu (2018) quote a black female academic who stated that the diversity and complexity of institutions led to feelings of disempowerment and it was compounded by balancing academic work and care-giving responsibilities.

Flaherty (2020) writes that editors of two journals reported that they had observed interesting, gendered patterns of submissions during the global lockdown and women were “losing out”. A third journal editor noted that submissions by women had increased, but that single authored submissions from women had decreased. One of the editors noted that although submissions by women had increased, they did not have as much time as men to submit single authored articles. Viglione (2020), in an article published during the early months of the pandemic, reflects and supports a number of researchers' understanding that academic publication outputs among women would decline compared to men. Women take up more childcare responsibilities in the household and this holds true even when both male and female partners are university faculty.

Rethinking and re-imagining the future of higher education in the context of Covid-19

Auerbach and Hall (2020) point out that Covid-19 presents the social sciences with an opportunity to take stock of and reflect on the need for fresh approaches to rethink and re-imagine the future. They advocate for compassion and empathy being the underlying principle as social scientists re-adjust their pedagogies, as well as their teaching and research practices. This includes rethinking how students are assessed. They also suggest the need for “being inside the body and experience of Covid-19”, which draws from feminist scholars who emphasise the need to focus on the personal to understand society and change. They further problematise the virtual, online world that has become the norm, arguing that online learning has the potential to reinforce inequalities and social tensions.

South Africa is one of the few African countries that has a government-funded research institute devoted to the social sciences: the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The first national survey-based study on the social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa was undertaken by the HSRC (Reddy, Sewpaul, Mabaso, Parker, Naidoo, Jooste, Mokhele, Sifunda & Zuma, 2020). More than 19 000 respondents participated in this online perception study. The results revealed that while there was increasing understanding of the importance of the lockdown and

social distancing protocols, the concerns most important to the general population was lack of money, food and health care. This research is important to develop appropriate policy and intervention strategies.

The HSRC also has a track record of undertaking research linked to health issues from a social science perspective (for example, HIV/AIDS) which reflects the expertise in the country to contribute to dealing with the pandemic. This is particularly important since increasingly, it is acknowledged that behavioural change is an important aspect of curbing the spread of the virus and co-morbidities are of major concern in countries such as South Africa with high prevalence of health ailments in the population. The effectiveness of measures to ensure these changes benefit from the insights from the social sciences is vital (NIHSS, 2020).

Social science research and data has catalysed new thinking about why we do research, what we should focus on and the methodological choices we make. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a range of socio-economic challenges and has brought to the fore the importance of social science research in a world where disruptions have become the norm. It is of critical importance that research is undertaken to inform policy responses which have characterised government efforts to put in place measures to deal with the pandemic. This includes the social impacts of these responses, as well as policy reviews, revisions and development as needed. The research has to be underpinned by a gendered feminist perspective that is cognisant of the intersectionality of race, sexuality, disability, and the urban/rural divide in its methodology, interpretations and interventions.

Paterson (2020) asserts that leading South African social scientists have called for increased engagement in shaping government's Covid-19 mitigation policies. There is no doubt that the pandemic has reinforced poverty and inequality in society and has resulted in new forms that require investigation and better understanding to effectively mitigate against these impacts. Schröder, Bossert, Kersting, Aeffner, Coetzee, Timme and Schlüter (2020) also indicate the need to better understand the implications of interventions on the Covid-19 outbreak dynamics in Africa, warning that socio-economic hardships, pressured national economics, and limited health care capacities and testing capabilities will present challenges to ensure compliance to interventions to control the virus. The social sciences can add value by understanding these trends and impacts. The prominence of dire economic hardships that will trigger social strife is a key focus. Furthermore, governance and management issues are critical from policy development to ensuring and monitoring compliance. It is important to highlight that the disciplines best positioned to examine these aspects, such as economic and management studies as indicated earlier, are in the social sciences.

The role of health social scientists during this time is also important to highlight. Social scientists informing what are largely thought of as ‘science’ problems are not new. As the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology’s (CREST, 2014) bibliometric and survey-based analysis of social sciences in South Africa revealed, there was an increase in research outputs from 1993 to 2012, with the two areas exhibiting the highest growth being social sciences research on climate change and health-related aspects. Reid (2014) also underscored the importance of the ‘medical humanities’ in health sciences education in South Africa. Reid (2014:109) asserts:

The humanities and social sciences have always been an implicit part of undergraduate and postgraduate education in the health sciences, but increasingly they are becoming an explicit and essential component of the curriculum, as the importance of graduate attributes and outcomes in the workplace is acknowledged. Traditionally, the medical humanities have included medical ethics, history, literature and anthropology. Less prominent in the literature has been the engagement with medicine of the disciplines of sociology, politics, philosophy, linguistics, education, and law, as well as the creative and expressive arts.

Furthermore, as Auerbach and Hall (2020) state, the uncertainty and disruptions associated with the pandemic reinforces the need for the social sciences whose main purpose is to grapple with the question of “how do we respond to living in a changed world?”

Paterson (2020) and Singh (2020) raise concerns about the composition of the government’s Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) which is almost exclusively made up of 51 external medical professionals (including academics and researchers), and government ministers and officials who also mainly have medical backgrounds. They argue that the MAC had few individuals with experience and expertise in relation to broader societal impacts which is a major limitation. Singh (2020) notes that multiple revisions of South Africa’s lockdown regulations show that the government is responsive to various concerns. Singh (2020), however, indicates that South Africa needs to move beyond a biomedical model in tackling Covid-19, especially in the absence of a vaccine which makes behavioural modification and compliance with rules the main measures to contain the pandemic. This requires the humanities, as well as the social and behavioural sciences to have significant representation on MAC. Similarly, Van Bavel, Baicker, Boggio, Capraro, Cichocka, Cikara, Crockett, Crum, Douglas, Druckman and Drury (2020) argue that because the Covid-19 crisis requires large-scale behavioural change and has substantial psychological burdens on people, valuable insights can be used from the social and behavioural sciences to help align human behaviour with the recommendations from public health experts and the government.

Furthermore, Yucesahin and Sirkeci (2020) caution that migratory and mobility patterns need to be monitored since this is a key mechanism that spreads the virus. The social sciences are needed to understand why people are not complying with lockdown and social distancing regulations, and what measures to use in areas (such as densely populated informal settlements) where social distancing is difficult. These issues will become more important as restrictions ease and to prepare society for future disruptions of this nature.

Messages from health officials have gone out which confuse individuals and which suggests that a mask, sanitising and social distancing can protect you, but there is the element of chance. Poor communities and vulnerable high risks individuals from all sectors of society may process the message as one that suggests that no matter what they do, they may not survive the pandemic. The latter could lead to non-compliance of non-pharmaceutical interventions. Social scientists are aware that messages need to be communicated in a way that provides hope, is realistic and is rational and can explain the “why” of interventions. There is a huge spike in positive cases and the South African Health Minister has recently suggested that a contributing factor is that people are not complying. We have anecdotal evidence that psychologists can assist in understanding the “psychology of non-compliance”.

While this chapter has focused on the social sciences, the Covid-19 pandemic and its multidimensional impacts, the importance of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research to have a more comprehensive understanding and insights is invaluable. The social sciences are geared towards these types of orientations with many disciplines (such as education, political sciences, anthropology, sociology, psychology, human geography and gender studies) already having a strong tradition of being involved in these types of research and training in quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. Furthermore, the NIHSS (2020) asserts that epidemiology and public health issues require and benefit from multidisciplinary fields that from the start have been influenced by several social science disciplines. Similar sentiments are expressed by Holmes et al. (2020) who argue that a key multidisciplinary priority for the Covid-19 pandemic is to mobilise expertise to deal with mental health issues. Specifically, they indicate that there is an urgent need for research to examine mental health consequences for vulnerable groups, how these can be mitigated under pandemic conditions, and on the impact of repeated media consumption and health messaging around Covid-19. Furthermore, Paterson (2020) cites Prof Crain Soudien, the Chief Executive Officer of the HSRC, who states that a major academic space has materialised around the “massive and under-theorised interface between hard science and the social sciences, and the extraordinary developments that are taking place in some knowledge fields where new questions are being asked and new frameworks are having to be developed”.

Conclusion

Social science in South Africa has a rich history of exposing socio-economic inequalities and engaging in scholar-activist research. It is therefore well positioned to contribute critically to framing issues, responses and impacts during and post the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, social science knowledge needs to be integrated into research and response efforts to ensure a better understanding of the pandemic. The knowledge is crucial to understand the impacts of both the spread and measures to stop the spread of the virus and the range of socio-economic impacts that may emerge. The lens needs to focus on the migration and mobility of populations, psychological stress and anxiety, and gender injustices. It is crucial for all within the science systems to be prepared to address other forms of conflict and violence in society (with predictions that existing forms will be reinforced, and new forms linked to the pandemic surfacing).

It is also important that in terms of integrating social sciences to deal with the pandemic (including participating in research endeavours) that the discourse should shift from funding to resourcing social sciences research and researchers. This includes developing appropriate low-cost methodologies that retain ethical and academic research integrity, pursue opportunities for skills development, and drawing on existing networks and capacity (and initiative new ones as needed). The entire global research and higher education community are re-thinking current ways of knowledge production and dissemination. Social scientists have been at the forefront of advocating for these changes, including championing transformation, decolonisation and re-curriculation efforts in South Africa. Thus, while the Covid-19 pandemic poses the worst disruptions in recent years, it also presents various opportunities for social scientists and the higher education sector generally.

In South African higher education, we have made certain limited gains in terms of gender justice and as we face and fight the pandemic, we need to ensure that these gains are not eroded by both the pandemic and Gender Based Violence (the pandemic within a pandemic). Staniscuaski, Reichert, Werneck, De Oliveira, Mello-Carpes, Soletti, Almeida, Zandona, Ricachenevsky, Neumann, Schwartz, Tamajusuku, Seixas, Kmetzsch and Parent in Science Movement (2020) argue that women being disadvantaged in science is an issue that needs urgent redress. They make a plea to ensure that women academics across all disciplines are not disadvantaged by what they label 'motherhood penalty', which essentially means all the additional responsibilities like home schooling have fallen on women to oversee during lockdown.

The current moment provides an opportunity for scholars, researchers, policy makers and implementers to work together across disciplinary boundaries to ensure a socially cohesive society. The following sentiment resonates with us:

Lack of knowledge kills hope ... reasonable hope is sustained by peoples own confidence, as it is based on what they can accomplish if they, as individuals, so will it. Such confidence requires knowledge (Dworkin, 2020).

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