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AUTHORS:

Floretta Boonzaier¹ 
Phumlani Mncwango²

AFFILIATIONS:

¹Department of Psychology,
University of Cape Town, Cape Town,
South Africa

²Academy of Science of South Africa
(ASSAf), Pretoria, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Floretta Boonzaier

EMAIL:

floretta.boonzaier@uct.ac.za

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Reflections on the humanities and social sciences in the *South African Journal of Science*

Significance:

The 120th anniversary of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* presents an opportunity to reflect on the role of the humanities and social sciences (HSS) in South Africa, particularly through the lens of the *SAJS*. The HSS offer critical, complex, multi-vocal thinking and analysis, the questioning of established norms and normative ideas, and can (and must) make important contributions to the equal and just future that we imagine and continue to work towards. The *SAJS* has become a publication of choice for scholars addressing these important questions in the HSS.

In 2023, the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences celebrated its 10-year anniversary. The Institute was established in response to a perceived ‘crisis’ and aims to support and advance “scholarship, research and ethical practice”¹ in the humanities and social sciences (HSS). This year, as South Africa celebrates its 30th year of democracy, and the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* celebrates its 120th year, it is apt to focus on the state of the HSS and their role in society. In this Perspective, we consider a brief history of the HSS in post-apartheid South Africa as well as the role the HSS have played specifically in the *SAJS*. We reflect on the first author’s position as Associate Editor in the HSS portfolio, considering the range of submissions received and the ways in which they address national and global priorities more broadly, commenting too on the place of HSS in the *SAJS*.

As South Africa emerged into a new democracy in 1994, discourses around the HSS emphasised the notion of ‘crisis’. The crisis discourse was bolstered by declining student enrolments in humanities degrees, relatively lower graduation rates and decreased funding, with a 13% decrease between 1996 and 2008.²

Post-apartheid government policies favoured the STEM disciplines, which contributed to the reduced support for the HSS.² Pillay and Yu³, who conducted an analysis of student enrolment data between 1999 and 2007, argued that the declining enrolments had to be understood as relative, in relation to the growth in other disciplines that offered graduates immediate pathways to employment and income generation. They also suggested a contextualisation of the ‘crisis’ in a post-apartheid context of increasing economic and consumerist pressures.

Nationally, a number of interventions were undertaken to address the state of crisis in HSS. The report on the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences was commissioned by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training.⁴ The report presents a rationale for the strengthening of the HSS in South Africa, for the continent of Africa and the Global South more broadly. Apart from “creating responsible, ethical citizens” (p.24), it is argued that we need to rise to meet the long-term needs of South Africa, given the pivotal role it plays in Africa and the Global South. In this way, the recommendations in the report go well beyond addressing the question of the crisis.

Some of the challenges and trends the HSS are meant to address include: the need to create liveable cities and to meet the food challenges associated with their creation; questions around planetary health and an associated focus on green energy production and consumption; the proliferation of epidemics and hazards; the rapid increase of digital technologies with widespread implications for all aspects of human communication; and the deepening, unrelenting realities of social inequity – specifically gender inequality.⁴ The particular challenges for South Africa are articulated as follows:

...it has one of the most dangerous patterns of life chance and income inequality in the world; a pattern threaded through with race and gender overtones; it has demonstrated some of the most extreme forms of violence against and abuse of women and children in the most intimate spaces of sociality; it has one of the weakest basic education systems on the African continent with high rates of youth unemployment, with volatile gang and gang-related cultural formations and finally its elites, predominantly white and increasingly black, are prone to predation and demonstrate an alarming lack of social responsibility. (p.25)

The HSS must play a crucial role in the global and local challenges we face, from offering a depth of understanding of society, culture, language, history and interpersonal relationships to the promotion of peace and harmony, but also fostering sorely needed values of social justice and equality. In these times when popular conservative rhetoric and other ideologies of hate, discrimination and exclusion gain massive traction – and where we are faced with the real-time horrors of genocide, war and the killing of innocent civilians including children, now especially those in the midst of it in Gaza – we know and deeply understand the importance of critical thinking to make sense of the world around us and towards the pursuit of equity and justice for all. The HSS offers a “critical engagement with the past and an understanding of what forms of excellence, dignity and relevance are appropriate for a dynamic and globalizing world”⁴(p.26).

The world we live in is complex, unpredictable and ever-changing. It is a world that needs the critical thinking, empathy, and understanding that the diversity of disciplines and fields in the HSS can bring. The HSS are not only about studying society and culture, they are about understanding the human condition in all its varied forms. The HSS

offer a needed set of analytical skills, informed analysis, judgement and creative critique, along with essential bodies of knowledge about society and the wider world.² Research in the HSS offers critical, complex, multi-vocal thinking and analysis, the questioning of established norms and normative ideas, and can (and must) make important contributions to the equal and just future that we imagine and continue to work towards.

This article reflects on the submissions undertaken in the first author's role as SAJS Associate Editor for the HSS between 2022 and 2024, with the purpose of reviewing the submissions received in this portfolio during that time, for an indication of the thematic areas they constitute and the ways in which they address the priorities for the HSS more broadly.

SAJS Social Sciences and Humanities portfolio: 2022–2024

In 2022, SAJS published a special issue entitled 'Waste as a Resource', which raised questions about existing waste management strategies and legislation and the socio-economic realities of South Africa. It aimed to offer local solutions to existing economic and social problems, making a case for a circular economy that positively shapes social and economic resilience and is important too for planetary health. The issue offered insight into the current societal and environmental issues in waste management, technology and practices, while at the same time foregrounding the socio-economic challenges within which these aspects require contextualisation. Overall, the argument for a deliberate move to a circular economy is recognised as important in an African context to stimulate job creation and income generation – whilst also addressing questions around environmental degradation and impacts. It is argued that cross-sector, government, civil society, business and academic communities must "collaborate on initiatives that build on circularity principles to advance sustainable development in pursuit of equitable and just societies"⁵.

Another important special issue published in 2022 – 'Radical Reason' – emerged from deliberations at the 2020 Science Forum South Africa (SFSA) and aimed to foreground how:

...the issues which trouble the world – chiefly those of social inequality and planetary sustainability – can be approached through insightful inquiry, and how solutions may be proposed which offer pathways to new futures which are just, equitable and sustainable.^{6(p.1)}

The 2020 meeting of the SFSA foregrounded the HSS – and its role in tackling the challenges faced in South Africa; and additionally as a response to the recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic was not simply

a biomedical question, but had deep implications for how people lived as both individuals and communities, how they managed their livelihoods and how they could begin the process of cultivating social imaginations of compassion, care and solidarity in the face of worldwide retreats into self-serving nationalisms, and ethnically and racially defined self-preservational forms of isolationism.^{6(p.2)}

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated exacerbation of conditions of inequality demanded that the HSS be foregrounded. Within this context, the special issue on Radical Reason offered a deliberate attempt to enlarge questions of reason, radical reason, with the recognition of the deliberate historical foregrounding of Eurocentric logics at the expense of African and Global South perspectives which have much to offer, not only for their own contexts but also for the world. It is argued that

radical thought, science, ethics, institutional arrangements, and other shared systems of valuation and understanding, are required to give depth and meaning to the full articulation of the questions that need to be asked now to engender the arrival of a just and equal world to come.^{6(p.2)}

The voluminous growth in digital technology, AI and the associated debates being foregrounded in the field propelled the publication of the 2023 special issue on 'Big Data and AI in Health Sciences Research in Sub-Saharan Africa'. This special issue introduces a broad range of scientific, ethical, legal and social issues surrounding data-intensive research and AI as it concerns African researchers.⁷ The issue raises questions around the ethics, sharing and protection of data from the perspective of African researchers undertaking data-intensive research. In the contexts in which mobility and location data are increasingly being collected, used for health and other research, and largely without awareness and consent, there have been increasing questions and concerns about the collection, use and sharing of these data.^{8,9} Silences around the widespread use and sharing of these data have been foregrounded to ask questions about legal, ethical and other protections that might be necessary – grappling with questions of personal data protection, the protection of privacy, consent, liability and accountability.

Aside from the thematic areas explored in the special issues over this period, there were several other themes that emerged from papers published in SAJS. These themes include a focus on COVID-19 explored through questions around the impact it has had on the mental health of university students in South Africa (a group already recognised as vulnerable to experiencing a range of common mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation)¹⁰; as well as through a paper that explored the role of the collection of electronic consent in a COVID-19 vaccine implementation trial in South Africa with a focus on participant perspectives on the understanding and preference for electronic consent – noted as important for reassurance that consent is provided with full recognition of the risks and benefits of participating in research¹¹. Following the theme around questions of vaccine consent and uptake within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its path of destruction in South Africa, Moodley¹² raised the question around the ethics of vaccine mandates, arguing for its implementation in the context of an over-burdened and stressed health system, the South African context of high HIV prevalence, chronic illnesses and other contextual challenges.

A further theme that characterised submissions during this period was a focus on road safety in South Africa – timely, given that South Africa has one of the highest rates of road traffic deaths.¹³ Given the massive role that alcohol plays in the burden of road traffic injuries and crashes, and the political and public conversation around zero tolerance drink-driving legislation, Sukhai et al.¹⁴ explored global research and experience on the adoption of zero-tolerance approaches – considering these within the South African context and landscape. Their paper makes important evidence-based, contextualised recommendations for the advancement of zero-tolerance legislation in South Africa. Further to the question of road safety, Bantjes et al.¹⁵ explored questions of pedestrian safety and motorists' attitudes to the law and driving practices in South Africa. A key finding in this work was that male gender was associated with unsafe driving, which was also associated with personality factors such as aggression, impulsivity, risk tolerance and altruism. A disregard for the law was also described as a key determinant of unsafe driving.

SAJS toward addressing questions that trouble the world: An abbreviated history

The post-apartheid moment also offered an opportunity for the SAJS to recognise the importance of the HSS where, between 1994 and 2002, a decision was taken to include papers submitted in these areas.¹⁶ Following this, concerted efforts were made to invite and include a greater number of contributions from the HSS disciplines.

In its 2006 report on research publishing in South Africa, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) recommended that the SAJS widen its scope to better enable the publication of multi-, trans- and interdisciplinary research, which includes broadening to enable a suitable publication for scholars in the HSS.¹⁷ The Journal implemented several changes to address the recommendations emerging from the report which included the appointment of an Associate Editor in the Humanities and Social Sciences – enabling a widening of the scope of SAJS from its historical focus on the natural sciences.¹⁸

As reflected in the above brief snapshot of submissions, the SAJS has now become a publication of choice for scholars addressing important questions in the HSS and this portfolio in the Journal has grown considerably since ASSAf first made its recommendations – submissions recently surpassing those in the physical sciences.¹⁷ Questions about planetary health and sustainability; physical and mental ill-health propelled by pandemics and its associations with societal patterns of inequity; questions around pandemics and mandatory vaccinations; the ethical, legal and other implications of growing digital technologies in the contexts of ‘big data’ and the sharing of health-related data; as well as road safety and its associations with normative gendered patterns are just a fraction of the thematic areas published in the SAJS. These questions speak to many of the issues that ‘trouble us’ as South Africans, but they are also globally relevant.

Looking to the future and greater alignment in the SAJS with scholarship that “offer(s) pathways to new futures which are just, equitable and sustainable”^{6(p.1)}, we would encourage contributions that speak to the specific challenges articulated above in the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences. These include a focus on the mechanisms and patterns that underlie violence and inequity and how these are threaded through gender, race and other intersections of oppression and difference; a focus specifically on gender-based violence and femicide which continue to be relevant locally and globally; inequalities that are pervasive in our education system; the implications of youth unemployment, gang violence and predatory forms of hyper-capitalist extraction and consumption. In sum, we welcome dialogue, innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship and reflective engagement on the progress we have made toward the just, sustainable and equitable future that we all imagine.

Declarations

F.B. is the SAJS Associate Editor for the Social Science and Humanities and P.M. is the SAJS Intern. There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.

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