Special Issue Editorial

Impacts and Responses to COVID-19: Perspectives from the Global South

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A REFLECTION ON THE PRESENT CONJUNCTURE

This inaugural Special Issue of *Social and Health Sciences* enters into, and thus must also speak to, a world which increasingly demands transformative social change. Therefore, before we describe the renewed scope of the journal and the contents of this Special Issue on COVID-19, it is worth offering a brief reflection on our present conjuncture.

It is perhaps a banality at this stage to note that the pandemic is a political concern inasmuch as it is a public health priority. The almost 1.5 million deaths from COVID-19 thus far - not to mention the millions of infections - were not inevitable, and correlations have been drawn between the kinds of government measures implemented and the variable rates of infection (see Watkins, 2020). Health guidelines and government orders which responded to COVID-19 have ushered in secondary effects which have profoundly changed people's lives. Indeed, national and international economies are said

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to be in a more dire state today than they were during the 2008 global recession. Rates of unemployment have risen rapidly all over the world and the psychological strain that people are experiencing is being compounded by their material struggles (Fisher et al., 2020; Khan, Ratele, & Arendse, 2020; The Lancet, 2020). Poor and working class people who could either not afford to stay away from work - and have thus been made to labour in unsafe conditions - or who have lost their jobs altogether, have been hardest hit by the pandemic (Davis, 2020; Dean, 2020). In many places, marginalised populations are being exposed to appalling levels of police brutality (see Farge, 2020), both in the guise of lockdown enforcement as well as through white supremacy's increasingly violent functioning (Dean, 2020; Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). Women have frequently been burdened with taking on the extra care work that is now being required (Fisher et al., 2020; Malherbe, 2020), with alarming rates of gendered violence also being recorded (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). On the other side of all of this, billionaires, like Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, have seen considerable profits as a result of the pandemic (Dean, 2020). We are, in short, seeing what can be understood as a kind of *corona capitalism* (Žižek, 2020), which has seized upon, aggravated, and even profited from already widening social inequalities (Malherbe, 2020).

State violence in the era of COVID-19 has, however, not gone unchallenged. This reached a fever pitch in the mass protests against the police murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in the United States (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). Protesters have since gathered all over the world to reject a range of issues, such as police brutality, draconian laws on abortion, and authoritarian regimes. With respect to COVID-19's exacerbation of the global crisis of care (see Malherbe, 2020), we are also seeing strike action against institutions that are prioritising profit-making over people's livelihoods (Cheng, 2020; Harris, 2020). Added to this, several community-led mutual aid initiatives are responding, at the grassroots level, to inadequate government measures which have been taken against the pandemic (Davis, 2020; Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020). Cooperation, it would seem, is proving crucial across these various resistance efforts (see Žižek, 2020), and although there has not, in recent memory, been a riskier time to gather and resist, there has also not been a more urgent moment to do so. As Jodi Dean (2020, p. 45) notes, "thousands of people were willing to risk their lives in the struggle against the racist capitalist system ... Between the virus and the economy, there was nothing left to lose. And there is a world to win."

The official response to the pandemic has, in large part, been led by public health experts, especially through behaviourally-based prevention strategies. Social scientists and researchers have also made important interventions here, and have sought to interrogate the socio-political antecedents and valances

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2

of the virus (e.g. Davis, 2020; Fisher et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Watkins, 2020). However, it has been the work of doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers that has allowed others to physically distance (Žižek, 2020). In addition to being under-resourced, most of these careworkers are being overworked, underpaid and under-appreciated (Davis, 2020; Malherbe, 2020). Moreover, these workers are, themselves, facing ongoing and acute exposure to the virus, and are thereby experiencing high rates of infection (Fisher et al., 2020).

While there has already been considerable research into the manifold effects of and responses to COVID-19, we still need to better understand its multifarious socio-political outcomes. Certainly, the true extent and medium-to-long-term consequences of the pandemic on communities and societies, particularly in the Global South, requires further examination. Beyond its immediate public health and socioeconomic impacts, we will need to develop in-depth analyses on the pandemic's heterogeneous effects on income inequality, food insecurity, and the availability of social goods (e.g. quality and safe public transport, education, stable and safe energy supplies, and adequate housing). Moreover, we need to better understand and learn from the different ways by which people have responded to the pandemic, many of which are not immediately discernible and have not been prominent in dominant discourses which have tended to focus on top-down interventions (see Malherbe, 2020; Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020). Our world has fundamentally changed, and we need to understand this change if we are to implement socially just transformation. It is this epistemological conjuncture that *Social and Health Sciences*, along with all of the human sciences, now finds itself.

THE INAUGURAL SPECIAL ISSUE OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES

Social and Health Sciences is the recently refreshed and expanded iteration of *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention*, now in its 19th year of publication. The name change indicates the journal's renewed scope which allows for consideration of today's most pressing socio-political concerns, especially the deepening social and economic inequalities, and the evolving intersections of these with the health, safety and peace of those in the Global South. Although located in Africa, *Social and Health Sciences* invites submissions from authors based in the Global South, as well as the Global North. *Social and Health Sciences* hopes to embody a multidisciplinary forum for critical discussion and debate among scholars, practitioners, activists, students and policy-makers whose interests and work intersect with the social and health sciences. The journal welcomes theoretical, empirical, applied and policy submissions on such topics as: violence in its multiple forms;

the structural and social determinants of health, safety and peace; injury, health and safety promotion interventions; community engagement; health and safety economics; health and safety systems research; and knowledge production in the social and health sciences. *Social and Health Sciences* is an accredited South African Post-Secondary Education (SAPSE) journal. All articles in the journal are subject to peer review. The journal will be published biannually and feature original full-length articles, theoretical papers, reviews, and perspectives or commentaries.

In this inaugural Special Issue on the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its individual, family, community, and societal impacts in Africa and - more broadly - in the Global South, we invited authors to submit reflections on community intervention programmes, the socio-political constitution of the pandemic, as well as the different kinds of health responses which have been observed. We also invited submissions that sought to probe into interventions enacted by government and civil society to manage the pandemic and its consequences. Some suggested topics here included: psychosocial and political implications of the pandemic; effects on material well-being; COVID-19 and identity; pedagogical implications; consequences for political organisation and impacts on policy; public health responses; and social activism in the time of COVID-19.

Due to the overwhelming number of manuscripts that we received, it was decided that we would publish two Special Issues. In this first issue, we have included pieces that outline various social dimensions of the pandemic (e.g. its psychological, social, physical, political, and discursive dimensions). In different ways, each paper seeks to think through our present conjuncture, and points towards future possibilities for research and intervention. Exemplary in this latter respect is the piece by Seneca Louw, Naiema Taliep, Ghouwa Ismail, and Samed Bulbulia, who reflected on how community engagement work has been reconfigured under COVID-19. They interrogate what this means at a structural level, for collaborative partnerships, and the psychosocial challenges therein.

Many of the articles we received were, understandably, psychological in their focus. Elias Oupa Mashile and Matshepo Matoane, for instance, examined the psychological health of emergency service personnel in South Africa's Free State province. Using exploratory factor analysis, they found that respondents to an online survey experienced intense feelings of vulnerability, exhibited a considerable range in their knowledge of how COVID-19 is spread, and demonstrated low-levels of knowledge on the signs and symptoms of the virus. Similarly, in their study on the mental health impacts of the pandemic in South Africa, Anita Padmanabhanunni and Tyrone B. Pretorius found high levels of hopelessness and depression in participants. These results, they argue, indicate the possibility of a

mental health crisis. It would appear that we neglect the psychological damage that COVID-19 has wrought at our peril. This should form part of our socioeconomic planning in the wake of the virus. In addition to ensuring our physical wellbeing, the mental health of healthcare workers and laypeople must be made a priority.

Many of the articles tackled the sociological dimensions of COVID-19. In offering eight core considerations, Lieketseng Ned, Emma Louise McKinney, Vic McKinney, and Leslie Swartz demonstrate how people with disabilities have been rendered especially vulnerable during the pandemic. They argue that the risk which people with disabilities face during this time has been aggravated through inaccessible healthcare systems. As such, they call for further research into disability-inclusive COVID-19 responses. In other articles, gender proved to be an especially pertinent sociological concern. In relying on a social provisioning framework, Odile Mackett examines how the pandemic has affected South African women. She demonstrates that socio-political issues related to gender inequality have, under the pandemic, been intensified, and emphasises the importance of critical frameworks for understanding such widening inequality. In another article analysing the violent policing of Black men living in townships, Malose Langa and Bandile Bertrand Leopeng examine several media reports which were published during South Africa's lockdown period. They found that policing was driven by racial and gendered stereotypes, and that the enforcement of lockdown regulations affirmed violent policing masculinities. COVID-19 did not create social inequalities and injustice. Rather, it entered into existing socio-economic and political terrains marked by histories of inequality and violence, and greatly exacerbated these. We therefore cannot effectively fight COVID-19 if we do not, at the same time, address the social ills within which the virus operates.

Finally, although almost all of the pieces submitted to the Special Issue addressed how those in power have responded to the pandemic, for some articles, this was a central focus. Sebastian van As, in his perspective piece, makes comparisons between government responses to the pandemic and road traffic crashes (the latter of which, for van As, represents a pandemic of its own). He notes that little attention has been paid to this latter pandemic, and offers some lessons for road safety campaigners that can be drawn from government responses to COVID-19. In their article, Richard Barber and Siew Fang Law examine how the media reported on the Australian government's public health policies during the pandemic, policies which they argue were mired in colonial logics and a discourse of whiteness. They also recount the kinds of resistance and community-based solidarity initiatives which responded to these inadequate State policies. In her piece, Thirusha Naidu focuses on issues of naming, and in particular how language has been used in South Africa both to fix the Other within a liminal identity space, and

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5

to blame the Other for the suffering experienced during the country's lockdown period, thereby allowing structural oppression to remain intact. As a response to this, she recounts how activists have utilised language, oftentimes in artistic forms, to protest oppression as well as what she calls the suffocation of identity. In all of these articles, social critique functioned as an analysis of dominant powers as well as a critical consideration of egalitarian future-building (much of which is, prefiguratively, being observed in the present). While the immediate practicalities of tackling the pandemic cannot be ignored, it is also important that we look imaginatively and ambitiously ahead towards a safer and more equal world.

For most of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated the discursive, ideological and material facets of our lives. Indeed, when we are not talking or reading about the pandemic, we are experiencing its effects. And yet, we are still grappling with how to live with its effects, and even how to understand what this means for the present, let alone the future. The articles featured in this Special Issue, along with those which will be published in the following Special Issue, represent some nascent attempts at understanding COVID-19, its immediate consequences, long-term valances, and metaphysical quandaries. It is through such a range of studies, reflections, perspectives, and treatises that we may begin to address the unacceptable social maladies that have long preceded COVID-19, and that will continue to prevent effective treatment of this virus, as well as future viruses. We hope that this Special Issue, along with future issues of *Social and Health Sciences*, will contribute to understanding a social world in flux so that we can begin contributing to the development of a healthier, more equal, and just world.

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