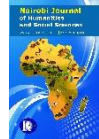




Are the humanities really 'A Wheel Turning Nothing' in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic?



Short communication



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Abstract

The humanities disciplines have been criticized as insignificant in the global efforts toward the fight against the coronavirus. This might probably be as a result of the age-long devaluation of humanities and the exaggeration of the contributions of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines by policymakers. The archival and evidence-based research methods guided the careful examination of historical documents, published articles, news reports, and speeches on the humanities and STEM disciplines. Extensive document analysis of more than thirty literature in the humanities that have contributed significantly to solving the multi-faceted problems of the COVID-19 was carried out. The findings revealed that the humanities' disciplines such as religion, psychology, literature, visual and performing arts, economics, and many others, have offered alternative approaches in alleviating the challenges of the COVID-19. The study concludes that the purported stagnation of the humanities in the fight against the COVID-19 is unfounded and baseless. It recommends that policymakers and administrators of academic institutions must consider the humanities field as very important, assigning it the same value as the STEM disciplines in terms of research funding and resource allocation to ensure sustainable global development.

Keywords: COVID-19, humanities, research funding, STEM, sustainable development



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Public Interest Statement

This short communication based on archival and evidence-based research methods examined the assertion that the humanities are 'a wheel turning nothing' in the global fight against the coronavirus pandemic. With illustrations from some excellent research outputs from the humanities, the study argues that humanities have creditably offered alternative paths to solving the multiplicity of the COVID-19 challenges. Yet, it has been unjustly mocked by critics as insignificant. This intellectually captivating piece would inform policymakers and administrators of academic institutions to value the contributions of the humanities field while ensuring that enough research funding and resources are allocated to its scholars.

Methods

The study utilized the archival and evidence-based research methods (Allen, 2017; Mohr & Ventresca, 2011) in examining more than thirty published articles, newspaper reports, speeches from humanists, and other historical documents on the humanities academic field and its devaluation in comparison with the STEM disciplines. Research outputs from humanists in response to the pluralistic challenges of the coronavirus were carefully analysed using the steps in the document analysis by Bowen (2009). Data were triangulated from the varied literary sources as a confluence of evidence to vouch for the data's credibility. After a thorough examination of each document, elements of content and thematic analysis guided the interpretation of the data in relation to the purpose of the study. Finally, an intellectually captivating essay that gratifies the humanities field and its significant contributions in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic was written.

Results and Discussion of the Literature Review

The Coronavirus global pandemic has presented multiple problems that challenge the survival of humanity. Granted, the contributions of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines toward the fight against the coronavirus pandemic are seen as more pronounced. This might be as a result of the perception held by many policymakers globally that the STEM disciplines contribute directly to the development goals of countries in areas of medicine and healthcare, environment, and engineering (D'Souza, 2019). The humanities academic disciplines have been unjustly mocked as 'a wheel turning nothing in an emergency' with its scholars described as 'masters of inactivity' (Callard, 2020). This description of the humanities disciplines is probably because of the age-long devaluation of the field in academia for the last forty years, starting in the UK and the USA, and spreading throughout other global universities (Costa, 2019). Since the 1980s, there has been an exaggeration of the relevance of the STEM disciplines in the attempt to solving the daily problems faced by global societies (Reiter, 2017) in comparison to the humanities disciplines. This has resulted in the

unjust view of the humanities as an extraneous aspect of learning, deprioritized by policymakers and some university officials (African Humanities Program, 2015). This has culminated in less than 0.5% of federal research funds offered to scholars in the field in the United States and about 1% in Europe (Rice, 2014) with many higher institutions deliberately narrowing investments in the humanities. A similar situation exists in Africa, where there have been deliberate attempts in elevating the STEM disciplines against the humanities at various academic levels (Nakweya, 2017). The legacy of African countries in constructing their national identities fuelled by the humanities discipline is gradually been lost due to the overemphasis of the STEM disciplines (D'Souza, 2019). It is not a surprise that the humanities academic field has been unfairly regarded as a wheel turning nothing in these times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the field of humanities is crucial in the global efforts against the coronavirus pandemic and its associated implications. As Strauss (2017) posited, the human element cannot be excused in the search for remedies to societal problems, including the current challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Granted, we equally need the research outputs of the STEM disciplines in finding innovative ideas that can be translated into functional products in dealing with the coronavirus. Yet, it is not every aspect of the pluralistic challenges of the coronavirus that can be handled using the STEM. Even in the global quest for automated devices to enhance contact tracing of COVID-19 cases as well as in the speedy delivery of medical and food supplies to hard-to-reach areas of communities, the human element is indispensable. The reason is that the humanities provide the required insight into 'the vastness and blind spots of big data' in the STEM and ignoring the human judgment in the critical stages of data analysis in the STEM, is to the peril of global communities as Gerald Greenberg of the Syracuse University asserted (Strauss, 2017).

True to its worth, the humanities disciplines have produced numerous ground-breaking research outputs that have put forward brilliant ideas in stemming the tide of the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, historians are busily digging into the medical history of the coronavirus pandemic, with a spotlight on past flu-like pandemics in human history, to find out the parallels in the histopathology, etiology, epidemiology and the pathophysiology to the current COVID-19 (Pullan, 2020). Also, the fields of ethnobotany and ethnopharmacology are currently been explored extensively to find plant-derived, indigenous medicinal plants that could be used in for boosting the resilience of the human immune system in the fight against the coronavirus. Indigenous plants such as Osha, fire cider, garlic, elderberry, Oregano, lemon balm and other traditional medicine with efficacious antiviral benefits (Begay, 2020), products of years of research by medical anthropologists and scholars in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), are been further studied at herbariums and laboratories to find herbal medicinal remedies in combating the coronavirus infections (Vellingiri et al., 2020; Zy et al., 2020). The research outputs of medical historians and medical anthropologists offer another significant

pathway to preventing the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the garnering of the anthropological experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic among the diverse population in global communities is relevant in offering needful insights into the cultural, religious, and spiritual perspectives of the coronavirus pandemic (Higgins, Martin, & Vesperi, 2020; Manderson & Levine, 2020). Research outputs from this branch of the humanities discipline are required in devising culture-driven public health education that has the potential in dispelling the negative cultural and religious motivated infodemics about the contraction and prevention of the coronavirus, especially in rural and indigenous communities (Ranasinghe, 2020). Also, studies are underway in finding out curative potentials in using religious and cultural practices as well as activities in the fields of performing and visual arts in the provision of therapeutic services in dealing with potential psychological stress from the coronavirus traumatic experiences (Roman, Mthembu, & Hoosen, 2020; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020; Dein, Loewenthal, Lewis & Pargament, 2020). Anthropologists, religious philosophers, and art therapists have suggested in their studies, the curative potentials of these mindful activities in dealing with stress-related and mental health disorders from traumatic experiences as a result of pandemics (Varshney, Parel, Raizada & Sarin, 2020; Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis & Schjoedt, 2020). Interestingly, creative writers and scholars in literature are succinctly recording via poems, short stories, and novels, the historical experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic amongst global communities from diverse perspectives. Others are conducting book reviews on award-winning novels on harsh experiences of pandemics and its associated lockdowns from renowned writers such as Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Hilary Mantel, Simon Armitagein, Albert Camus, Sinclair Lewis, Sophocles and many others (Antiel, 2020; Eisenman, 2020). These literary masterpieces initiate critical thinking into the past and present experiences of pandemics as well as the unresolved aspects of the coronavirus' research, infection, treatment, and prevention to make better decisions now and in the immediate future.

The experiences of the economic impacts of the coronavirus on the creative arts industry, tourism industry and the informal sector workers who depend on hand-to-mouth work culture are extensively researched to aid in formulating economic recovery, mitigation and adaptation strategies in dealing with the economic hardship faced by global communities, especially the rural poor whose livelihoods and fragile businesses have been shattered as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (Nicola et al., 2020; Foo, hin, Tan, & Phuah, 2020). Scholars from the Humanities disciplines have also investigated the cultural and social implications in the use of technology in these times of the COVID-19, tagged as 'the new normal', in deploying religious, educational, economic and political activities in global communities (Whitelaw, Mamas, Topol & Spall, 2020; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Adotey, 2020; Pryor, 2020). Gender and racial scholars are also busily investigating the disparaging

racial and gender-driven inequities toward blacks, females and other ethnic minority groups in the provision of health care, medical and food supplies, financial relief packages, etc. (Black Lives Matter Global Network, 2020; Begay, 2020; Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey & Tertilt, 2020). These studies are very important in showcasing the 'second pandemic' —the cruel treatments of minority and vulnerable groups, whose voices could have been silenced to ensure that social justice and equality are sought for them (Rice, 2014). The excellent research outputs from the humanities discipline in the global fight against the COVID-19 are commendable. They are testimonies to the worth of the humanities' academic field and nullifies the unkempt assertion that the humanities discipline is a wheel turning nothing in the global efforts toward the prevention of the COVID-19. The sterling studies from the diverse fields in the humanities immortalize the recommendation by the African Humanities Program in 2015:

No knowledge-led development strategy can succeed without a solid core of humanistic understanding and humane values. To envision the future, we must understand the lessons of the past. To act in the present, we must be sensitive to current cultural complexities' (African Humanities Program, 2015).

Policymakers and well-meaning persons in global communities must understand that the healthy balance between the STEM disciplines and the humanities is the only approach to sustainable global development (Nakweya, 2017). It is an undeniable fact that the investments into humanities research results in high productivity (Holm, Janick & Scott, 2015). Therefore, funding humanities studies must be given a priority, the same as the STEM disciplines. Academic institutions must not devalue the impacts of training in the humanities and/or skew resources meant for the field to other fields of study, as have been unjustly done by some institutions. It is only when global societies accord the humanities the valued recognition it deserves and gives it a centre stage as an esteemed academic field at par with the STEM disciplines that the world will get to the verge of fully combating its challenges.

Conclusion

This short communication aimed at examining the contributions of the humanities in the combat of the coronavirus pandemic in the light of the criticism levelled against the field as a wheel turning nothing. The reviewed literature has shown that the research outputs of the humanities are significant and demands recognition by its critics instead of the baseless age-long devaluation of the field as not productive. The study contends that sustainable global development can only happen if policymakers, administrators, and managers of academic institutions as well as well-meaning individuals accord humanities, the academic worth it

deserves just as the STEM disciplines. More research grants must be provided by grant-awarding agencies to ensure that studies in the humanities are extensively carried out. This would result in a more holistic and concerted effort in sustainable development rather than the blind and single reliance on the STEM disciplines in solving every challenge faced by global communities.

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