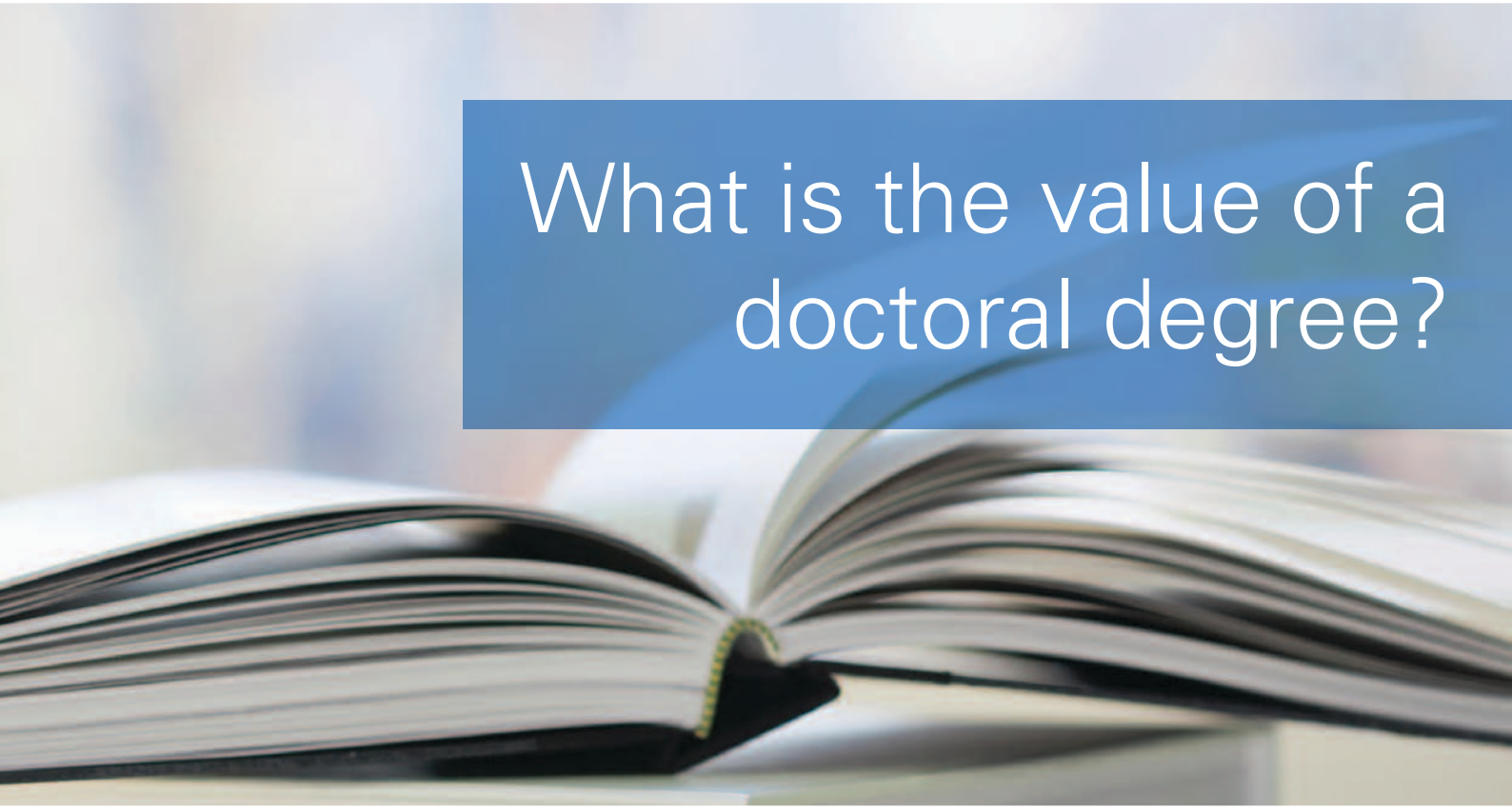

What is the value of a doctoral degree?

At a recent HSRC seminar entitled *A slightly irreverent guide to surviving your PhD*, a member of the audience wanted to know: what is the value of a PhD? ***Safiyya Goga*** considers a possible answer to this astutely-posed question that cuts to the heart of a bigger question about the role and value of research within the humanities and social sciences (HSS), particularly in present-day South Africa.

At a discussion on the humanities, someone said the significance of the 'softer' sciences was in helping the 'harder' sciences better understand the communities and people in whose lives they hoped to make a difference. In other words, the social sciences play a crucial role in providing insight into the human and social dimensions and political/economic/historical contexts of communities.

Yet, does the value of the HSS rest primarily in the service of interdisciplinary, policy-oriented projects? And if its value extends beyond this role, how does it do so? There are many possible answers to this question. Certainly the value of research in any discipline may be measured by the extent to which the research produces valid and authoritative knowledge. However, what is it about the kind of knowledge produced by the HSS that makes it distinctly valuable? What is the particular value of such knowledge? Perhaps its value becomes most evident when we are confronted by a good piece of social science/humanities work, or when we are dealing with difficult questions about social conditions that require complex answers, such as the question of statues, national memory and racial history that recently gripped the nation.

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Perhaps the question of value is related to the question of necessity. What precisely does the humanities offer that makes it a necessary discipline? Is it that it does interesting work? What should it be doing, and doing well, for us to see its value?

For example, the humanities faculty is sometimes seen as commensurate with the law faculty. Yet, within the field of legal studies is an area called the sociology of law. The purpose of this area of law is to study the relationship of law to society, i.e. to subject laws to critical analysis because laws have significant social power. This has significant implications because it suggests the sociology of law sits both outside and in some sense *in evaluation of* the law. It evaluates the purpose, effects and functions of laws not from within the confines of legality or legal thinking, but from the outside, in order to provide some kind of understanding of how law functions as an area for the exercise of power and to critically assess the effects of this on societies, on social justice, and so forth.

According to Italian philosopher Mario Perniola, it is the duty of the humanities to 'underline the ambiguous and enigmatic character of knowledge and power'. Meaning that anywhere that social power resides, including within the academic world and the places from which knowledge emerges, is a valid site for interrogation.

Does social critique give the humanities its purpose, its *raison d'etre*?

Does social critique then give the humanities its purpose, its *raison d'etre*? Is it perhaps alongside the investigative journalism or documentary modes of inquiry where a subject is critically analysed and put into context, with the idea of providing critical insight, knowledge or even truth about a subject? The necessity of the humanities, in such an understanding, would be underpinned by the idea that knowledge/truth/critical insights are not always self-evident or easily accessible. That there is something in the nature of being human or of grasping social realities or of living socially that necessitates in-depth critical inquiry, in order for truths to be revealed. And that this revelation of insight goes beyond the exposé of the investigative journalist, and beyond the criteria of giving a voice to the voiceless.

One of the crucial offerings of the humanities is its interpretative work, which provides a critique of the obvious and that which is taken for granted as 'true'. Its revelations are seldom shocking but always eye opening. It uncovers not what is deliberately or insidiously kept hidden, but what is hidden because it is too obvious, in the way that a fish is not aware of being surrounded by water. This is also where HSS are at their most vulnerable, and most open to standing accused of heresy and mere conjecture. It was Adorno who said, 'The person who interprets, instead of accepting what is given and classifying it, is marked with the yellow star of one who squanders his intelligence in impotent speculation, reading things in where there is nothing to interpret.'

What makes a study *scientific* and what is necessary in order to make it scientific, are crucial to how much value a study has.

While everything may be worthy of being studied then, what makes a study *scientific* and what is necessary in order to make it scientific (what takes it beyond the realm of everyday knowledge), are crucial to how much value a study has.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu draws a distinction between practical knowledge and scientific knowledge. Practical knowledge is the way people make sense of the world around them. When people 'do what they have to do', they apply practical knowledge to 'get by' and indeed, to 'get ahead' in the(ir) world. It then means to understand people or social phenomena (or communities, or societies, or nations, or social worlds), we need to understand and interpret the way people act within and make sense of their worlds, their actions and the meaning of these actions. It is the rigour of this analytical process that enables the production of scientific knowledge about social/human lives.

It may be that this will be insisted on as simply the distinction between applied and basic research, and that the value of basic research is reduced to research on topics and subjects that are of interest to a particular researcher without the burden of providing relevant policy implications. Yet the value and indeed necessity of the HSS do not lie in their allowing researchers to pursue whatever research they want to or to pursue obscure topics that are of interest only to a select few; their value cannot lie in allowing eccentric, elitist or inaccessible scholarship. For Pierre Bourdieu, sociology is meant to produce knowledge that is 'liable to exert a political efficacy every time it reveals the laws of functioning of mechanisms that owe part of their own efficacy [and power] to being misrecognised.' In other words, sociology that is valuable is sociology that reveals how social power is misrecognised.

The HSS then gain their value, necessity and distinction through producing knowledge that can be powerful in a revelatory way, and even politically effective. And the value of a good PhD is that it can do the valid and authoritative interpretative work on rigorously collected data to produce powerful and revealing knowledge and insights. ■

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