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## **Response to *Women in the Profession? Assuming Gender in the Analysis of the Composition of UK Politics Departments***

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We would like to thank Charlotte Heath-Kelly for her comments on our article and are hopeful that this intervention might prompt a broader discussion within the discipline about how to conduct such research without resorting to binary understandings of sex and gender. First, we would like to respond briefly to two points she raises concerning research design and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliance. We would then like to respond in more depth to what we consider the most serious criticism – that of the ethics of the research project – and to take the opportunity to apologise for causing anyone hurt.

With regard to research design, Heath-Kelly says that a survey “would provide more accurate data on the position of women, and others, in Political Science departments” than our chosen method of gathering information from departmental websites (2020: 2). While it is true that such a method might provide more accurate data on the individuals who choose to respond to the survey, it would almost certainly not provide more accurate data at the population level, which is the focus of our research. Nor, again almost certainly, would it allow us to make meaningful comparisons between departments. Surveys are beset by low response rates. For example, the survey that Allen and Savigny used in their article on experiencing gender in UK political science had a response rate of ten *per cent*. Moreover, the majority of their respondents were women (61%), which, as we know, is not a reflection of their presence within the discipline as a whole<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it would not be easy to draw meaningful conclusions about the state of the discipline as a whole by using such a method if a similar response rate was achieved (which is more than likely). If we continue to hold that researching issues of female representation at a disciplinary level is worthwhile (and in the public interest), then it is not easy to imagine another method to the one we have employed thus far being more appropriate for undertaking that task.

Heath-Kelly also states that she is unclear how the research complies with the GDPR because, as she correctly assumes, no one who we studied as part of the research was asked for their consent for the processing of their personal data. While there are other ethical issues with our approach, to which we return below, we do not believe there is an issue with GDPR compliance. Consent does not necessarily have to be obtained for the processing of personal data to be compliant with the GDPR. Instead, personal data has to be processed in a way that is ‘lawful’. From the six possible ways in which processing personal data can be lawful, we believe our research is compliant on the basis that

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear: we are not criticising the work of Allen and Savigny. A survey was an entirely appropriate method for their research. We are using their work, which is the closest we know of to what we are doing in terms of discipline and focus, to show the drawbacks of using such a method for what we are trying to achieve.

it is a 'public task' and that the processing was necessary for us to perform a task that is in the public interest<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, we continue to believe both our research to be GDPR-compliant and our research design to be the most appropriate for the task we are undertaking. However, it has also become apparent to us – both from this exchange and from questions posed to us when we have presented this research – that our research contains methodological, ethical, and political flaws that we will need to address if we undertake further updates to our research. While we did think about the issues raised by Heath-Kelly, it is clear that we did not think about them hard enough and that our data collection procedure was, in hindsight, insufficient and problematic.

Before undertaking the research, we did discuss the coding of non-binary, gender nonconforming, and trans people and we did use three gender categories in our research to allow for gender variance. We say in Footnote IV:

If the gender of the academic could not be assumed from their name and/or photo, then further internet searches were undertaken to ascertain their gender. Unless explicitly stated (e.g. through a stated preference for using the pronouns they/them/theirs), then it was assumed that the academic would identify as either female or male. This is not a perfect method because some non-binary people still use 'he' or 'she'. However we are confident that the method employed will not skew the sample too much (Pflaeger Young *et al.* 2020: ??).

This is, we now think, only a partial defence against Heath-Kelly's criticisms. First, it assumes incorrectly that only people who are visibly gender nonconforming can be non-binary. Second, we have almost certainly made some incorrect assumptions about individuals' gender identities (and should not have just waved this issue away in terms of it not skewing the sample too much). Thirdly, because they sat on University Councils and were tangential to the main focus of our article, we do not mention the non-binary people who were identified through their stated preferred use of they/them/their and so, effectively, people who are non-binary, gender nonconforming, or trans have been erased from our discussion. We neither wished to cause hurt, nor to render people invisible in our research, but we recognise that we did both and for that we would like to say sorry.

In the future, we would like to produce further updates on the status of women in the profession but we would also like not to repeat the mistakes we made in our research here. If we are honest, we are currently struggling to see how both these things can be achieved satisfactorily. We are caught between our – we think well-justified – belief that the method we use is the most appropriate to the task at hand, and the fact that this method requires the researchers to make assumptions about sex and gender that may be incorrect. Thus far, all our ideas about how to resolve this quandary have their own problems. For example, we thought we could address the issue of consent by opening up the data to allow individuals to view and, if necessary, correct their gender assignment, but rejected this on the basis that it would potentially require people to out themselves as trans or non-binary in order to be registered correctly. We also considered modifying the results to take into account the proportion of people in the general population who are non-binary, gender nonconforming or trans, but, again, we rejected such an approach, in part, because the proportion of people who are trans and non-binary in academia is likely to be significantly lower than the

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<sup>2</sup> For more on GDPR, see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/>. For information on GDPR and academic research, see <https://www.ukri.org/files/about/policy/ukri-gdpr-faqs-pdf/>

proportion in the general population (trans people being disproportionately likely to be unemployed or concentrated in low-income jobs).

In short, we are stuck and hope that others may be able to contribute to finding a satisfactory solution. If anyone does have any suggestions about how we might be able to operationalise non-cisnormative methodologies in quantitative analysis and/or how we should incorporate consent into our data collection process, then please feel free to contact us (and maybe also join the research team).

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