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# Equalities in freefall? Ontological insecurity and the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the academy

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This intervention focuses on the impact of the global crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on existing racialized and gendered inequalities within the academy and in particular our discipline of Politics and International Relations. We argue that responses to recent crises within the academy have exacerbated ontological insecurity among minoritized groups, including women. When coupled with increased caring responsibilities, the current crises call into question who can be creative and innovative, necessary conditions for knowledge production. While university managers seek to reassure university staff of the temporary nature of COVID-19 interventions, we argue that the possibilities for progressive leaps at a later state of institutional regeneration is unlikely when efforts to address structural inequalities are sidelined and crisis responses are undertaken which run counter to such work.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19, higher education, gender, race, universities

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This intervention locates the COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis with the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities within the discipline of Politics and International Relations (POLIR). Specifically, it focuses on the

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complex ways in which institutional responses interact with structural inequalities in the discipline and the home, as paid and unpaid work increasingly overlap in time and space, and the implications of systemic racisms become more manifest. We already know that a range of factors, including race and gender, intersect in Higher Education (HE) settings to produce different outcomes for individuals who do not embody the default stereotypes that identify academics/professors as cis white men. Past responses to crises often have had an adverse impact on minoritized groups and are gendered in terms of their causes, impact and responses. While we focus on our discipline of POLIR, our reflections will undoubtedly have resonance across disciplines. Drawing attention to 'pressure points' for pushback, this intervention considers the added ontological insecurity induced by the global pandemic and its responses, on knowledge production and HE. 'Crises' which appear to define our current reality also offer ruptures to the 'normal' way of doing things and provide opportunities for ideas previously thought unfathomable to take hold (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017). We use the concept of ontological security to interrogate how to deal with complex crises that require us to respond to the global pandemic and address systemic racism in which our institutions and discipline are implicated. Ontological security is 'the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person ... in order to realize a sense of agency' (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). The prism of ontological security is widely applied within International Relations, however, we now turn the lens onto the discipline itself at a time of unprecedented challenge and crises. Crises, we argue, destabilize ontological security.

Besides the material challenges of financial uncertainty to the sector, there is also an existential anxiety that has developed around the purpose of the university. The university is ontologically secure when knowledge production is possible in a safe environment, wherein 'creative performance' (generating research ideas) and 'innovative performance' (turning these ideas into published manuscripts) are within grasp (Da Silva & Davis, 2011, p. 373). The opposite, however, appears to be the default. Ontological insecurity leads to a decrease in productive creative work, but it also leads to an increase in the labour of care. The work that is deemed necessary to respond to crises is not distributed equally within the academy and therefore has an asymmetrical impact on who has the time to fulfil the ideal purpose of the university. Moreover, because crises have the tendency to redirect research focus towards response, what research counts and who gets to do it, can reinforce marginalization within the academy, particularly for minoritized groups who undertake a larger share of the burden of care work (Rollock, 2019a). The pandemic has brought into sharp relief the relationship between real-world crises and the ones within it. This reflection thus examines the ontological insecurity of the pandemic and responses to it, its differentiated impact and the implications of what this means for knowledge building within our discipline.

Within POLIR, the unprecedented load of work and attendant anxieties fall to marginalized groups. While a disciplinary survey shows that men were over-represented in permanent positions, with women over-represented in precarious ones (International Studies Association [ISA], 2015), in the UK, Kalwant Bhopal (2018) demonstrates that the situation is even more dire for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. It is also particularly acute for Black women; in 2019, the UK only had 25 Black women professors (less than 0.1 per cent) (Rollock, 2019a) compared to 4,340 (or 6 per cent) of white women and 12,790 (15 per cent) white men in the academy (Rollock, 2019b). As in the pandemic, the already marginalized are also the most precarious (Advance HE, 2019). Ontological insecurity thus emerges not only from the financial loss, incurred as a result of the pandemic, which is new, but significantly by those already at the sharp end and more so as a result of COVID-19 mitigations.

For our discipline especially, the issue of career advancement is of particular relevance to considering the long-term impact of the pandemic on addressing racialized and gendered inequalities. Pflaeger Young et al. (2019) confirm Bhopal's argument. They go further, however, finding that while some progress has been made on women's position within POLIR in terms of precarity, a barrier remains 'between early career and more senior positions' (Pflaeger Young et al., 2019). In some POLIR academic units, moves to suspend promotions, freeze pay or introduce promotions without pay rises, in response to pandemic-induced financial insecurity has thus had significant implications for career progression and regression on pay parity. The gender pay gap within UK HE stands at 15.1 per cent (Pells, 2019), while BAME staff face a 9 per cent gap compared with their white colleagues, with particular detriments to Black staff with a huge 14 per cent gap (Weale, 2019). Significantly, because women are less likely to

negotiate starting salaries, and are likely to lose more than they gain, when they do (Wade, 2001), pay progression through promotion provided an important corrective. Thus, while short-term responses appear reasonable, they reinforce insecurities, potentially exacerbating structural inequalities in the longer term.

For many, having the space to research and publish is important for career advancement (Hesli, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012, p. 11). Beyond the individual level, publications also shape the canon within the field. The racialized and gendered impact of the pandemic on publishing is therefore cause for concern when we consider whose knowledge and what knowledge is being impacted at this juncture. Submissions to journals are already skewed along racialized and gendered lines, and by location (Medie & Kang, 2018), in some areas this is particularly stark. For instance, a study of Security Studies journals previously found men published significantly more than women, and only 2 of the 11 journals reviewed had a gender balance (Ruble, 2020). At the height of the global lockdown, the editors of ISA journals have identified both an increase in submissions but a decrease in the proportionate number of papers submitted by women. In *International Studies Perspectives* this has translated into a 19 per cent decline of papers submitted with at least one woman as a co-author (Wiegand, Lisle, Murdie, & Scott, 2020). The UK-based Political Studies Association (PSA) also found an increase in submissions across its journals, although no increase in the gender submissions gap, crucially as the PSA leadership note:

*this does not mean, though, that there is 'nothing to see here'. Longer research and writing times in the social sciences suggests that the EDI impacts of COVID-19 on publishing may remain invisible for some months.* (Awan-Scully & Dunlop, 2020)

While the pandemic may have facilitated an increase in productivity for some, what we know about care work and the emerging data surrounding this suggest an adverse gendered impact. As paid support for care has plummeted due to the global measures taken to tackle the pandemic, women, including academic ones, have filled the gaps in support.

As Ea Høg Utoft (2020) notes, single academic women during COVID-19 could in theory become the 'ideal academic', an 'unburdened academic – being alone and undisturbed in my home'. Yet living through a pandemic means either unpaid care work overtakes paid work responsibilities or paid work takes over the private sphere. This also ignores the impacts of intersectional oppressions – there is no singular model for the single academic woman. While the implications of formal caring responsibilities have been acknowledged by many universities as an outcome of COVID-19, often this does not address the existential insecurity that comes with the global pandemic, global racism and the anxieties of undertaking informal care work, which is often invisibilized within our institutions (see Utoft, 2020). Black academics already make often unacknowledged extra contributions to the care and support of each other and Black students, because they have no other recourse, and are already always ontologically insecure (see Rollock, 2019a, p. 38). As Meg Guliford (2020) argues then, the responses to COVID-19 by well-meaning white people and universities have failed to account for the 'racial realities' of our current crises, including the trauma of the disproportionate number of deaths among people of BAME backgrounds. The current crises further curtail the ability of many minoritized scholars to engage in creative practice and knowledge production and they are therefore disproportionately impacted.

## 2 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 crisis is both racialized and gendered in terms of who is disproportionately affected by the crisis and its responses. The pandemic has been compounded by bringing to the fore the operation of racial hierarchies in society and the academy. This current crisis exacerbates ontological insecurity with implications for innovative practice as evidenced from emergent data about journal submissions. The long-term effects of our current situation will be devastating to attaining a truly diverse and inclusive academy, and creative practice. POLIR has made important

inroads to acknowledge the gender gap within our profession; yet, responses to COVID-19 expose gaps and threats to progress, and more profoundly, racial inequalities. The inevitable funding squeeze is a particular threat at disciplinary and institutional levels. It is necessary to reject hierarchies of crisis, for example, where the urgency of response exacerbates and reinforces inequalities inadvertently or by design, sometimes with a flawed assumption that these can be addressed during a later regeneration stage. It is all too easy in the heart of a crisis to let the equalities agenda fall away to short-term thinking, however, the implications of doing so, particularly now, are detrimental for the ontological security of individuals, communities and importantly career advancement and the knowledge that shapes POLIR and the academy in the years to come.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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