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Ties That Bind: An Inclusive Feminist Approach to Subvert Gendered '*Othering*' in Times of Crisis

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, as an ongoing societal crisis, compounds pre-existing intersectional inequalities. Since the start of this crisis, those on the margins; women, single parents, LGBTQ+, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic peoples, and those living in precarity and poverty found themselves increasingly 'othered'. As a group of academics who encounter gendered reality in disparate ways, we unite through this paper to prioritise a collective ethic of care as a counternarrative to the 'business as usual' rhetoric that endures as our oppressive reality. In responding to this special issue, a (dis)embodied alterethnographical text is offered, encompassing four evocative reflections on symbolic annihilation to 'unmute' our individual voices. We present an inclusive discussion to connect our disconnected otherness, collectively resisting the dominant, patriarchal narratives, through non-linear, 'messy writing'. Our contribution is threefold. First, we empirically contribute to dismantling heteronormative binarism by reclaiming our collective voices as a loud rebuttal to hegemony. Second, through collective conceptualisations of gendered crisis, we problematise theorising gender from a unified conceptual lens to demonstrate the importance of an inclusive approach to feminism. Finally, a collective discussion of our cumulative experiences, contributes to the writing differently agenda, subverting the limitations of the encountered gender binaries.

Key words: alterethnography, inclusive feminism, disconnected otherness, gendered binaries, solidarity, symbolic annihilation

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis, compounds pre-existing intersectional inequalities (Rodriguez et al., 2016) and exacerbates the patriarchal nature of labour and work (Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, those on the margins of society have been affected disproportionately (Chung, Birkett, Forbes, & Seo, 2021; Sze et al., 2020). Women, single parents, LGBTQ+, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic peoples, and those living in precarity and poverty increasingly fear a patriarchal roll-back of social rights in the context of this pandemic (Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020) and future crises.

As a group of four academics who encounter our gendered realities in disparate ways, we first individually explore how ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Tuchman, 1979) manifested in new forms and spaces during this pandemic, creating contemporary, intersectional gendered realities in the crisis. We capture the spirit of this time where many peoples’ homes have become a workplace and emphasise our academic experiences as interconnected with wider society. In our writing and reflections, we seek to counter the ‘scattered hegemonies’ (Grewal and Kaplan, 2014), through conducting ‘feminist work across cultural divides without ignoring differences or falling into cultural relativism’ (2014, p.7).

Second, gender binarism is collectively challenged through an inclusive discussion that recognises the complexity and multiplicity of our gendered realities. As feminists and caregivers in non-traditional families and gender roles, we seek to explore how we mobilize during a crisis to resist the structural marginalization of gender and work issues. We draw on our divergent experiences to demonstrate the importance of an inclusive approach to feminism. Our writing is grounded in the ‘affects’ (Spinoza, 1994) arising from the humbling and exhausting daily realities we faced during this pandemic. Care is posited here as an objective of our shared writing, as an affective and interpersonal relationship (Morse et al., 1990) that

situates our lived experiences as academic kinship; caring across difference, and alternative kinship structures (Care Collective, 2020) during a global crisis.

Drawing on the aforementioned extant literature, our affective response to the pandemic and to the call for the special issue, forms an integral aspect of our reflective embodied experiences and is the foundation of our collective. Our shared perceptions of pre-existing intersectional injustices became heightened as we observed the amplification of heteronormativity during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the outset of our collaboration, we built ties that prioritised mutual solidarity and an ‘ethic of care’ (French & Weis, 2000; Gilligan, 1993; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015). We placed our interrelatedness and mutual wellbeing above instrumental aims. We echo ontological critiques of neo-liberal academic writing (Anderson, Elliott, & Callahan, 2021), and propose that ‘value itself arises as a product of actual caring and being cared-for’ (Noddings, 1995, p. 13). In this collaboration, such caring is central to our process; we could not work together, share our vulnerabilities, and grow affective solidarity (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), grounded in our emergent anger, without a foundation of trust, solidarity, and mutual care in our relationship.

Our divergent intersectional differences (Crenshaw, 1991) offer embodied alterethnographical texts (Ericsson & Kostera, 2020) to explore individual and collective *othering* and symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979). First, we reflect on our individually unique experiences of gender during the COVID-19 pandemic. Author A reflects on her experience as a single parent and immigrant student working with irreconcilable work-life balance and clinging to her sense of self through physical and emotional exhaustion. Author C reflects on her experience of the division of labour in a lesbian household and the impact on her through the shared trauma of a partner who contracted COVID-19. Author B reflects on his experience as a parent who became the primary caregiver at the start of the lockdown and sees fatherhood discourse silenced in national media debates. Author D

reflects on the continuous symbolic annihilation and state violence against the legal rights of transgender people. They share how this precarious and marginalised existence impacts their sense of ontological security. Second, gender binarism is dismantled through an inclusive discussion to subvert the symbolic annihilation evidenced in our experiences. We collectively resist the oppressive affects associated with isolation, fear, and sadness, as well as the (un)muting of contemporary forms of scholarly care for one another.

‘Symbolic Annihilation’ (SA) (Tuchman, 1979) describes how categories of people are marginalised in society by underrepresentation, trivialisation and condemnation (p. 533). Whilst it originally focused on denigrating representations of women in the US media, it has more recently been used to question the portrayal of motherhood in mainstream drama (Åström, 2015) and queer experiences in heteronormative healthcare discourse (Müller, 2018). The patriarchal framing of normativity in health contexts provides a touchstone for our experiences of SA in the COVID-19 healthcare crisis. In writing for, and responding to, this special issue, we utilise SA to counter the muting of other voices in the academy as a part of wider society. Further, we posit our writing as a way to present alternatives to some of the repressive ideals associated with academic writing (Anderson et al., 2021).

Our individual and collective reflections draw on Calás and Smircich’s (2020) concepts of “(Un)Muting” and “Mutiny”. Drawing on “Muting”, we begin by reflecting on our individual accounts and our isolated (*dis*)*connected otherness*. We ‘show’ how SA manifested in new gendered forms and spaces during COVID-19 to exclude and mute our voices, albeit that we each felt and experienced the muting of our voices differently. We organised collectively to give voice, “(Un)muting”, our multiple gendered realities to create a path out of our isolated (*dis*)*connected otherness*. Since “(Un)muting” is a process behind which revolt, “mutiny”, is the motive (Calás and Smircich, 2020), collectively deconstructing

and reversing the binarism we experienced renews our voices within a mutinous shared space. The first step to dismantle binarism harnesses our isolated (*dis*)*connected otherness* by a principle of (re)organising gender individually and collectively in times of crisis.

Using a foundation of care as a form of solidarity, our mutuality is shaped by our shared feminist principles to challenge prevailing patriarchal discourses, which include the normative academic responses to this crisis. Much of the academic literature that responded to the gendered inequities of the pandemic, including our own (Author A & Author B, 2020; Author C et. al., 2021), offer hopeful conclusions (see Author D, 2019 as a notable exception) that steer towards ‘joyful affects’ (Pullen, Rhodes, & Thanem, 2017; Spinoza, 1994) as a unifying catalyst for affective solidarity (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) and action. Reflecting on our own complicity with normative writing, we agree with O’Donnell’s (2020) critique of positive messages that can dilute the emotional energy that could be mobilised towards action in times of crisis. As Pullen et al. (2017) outline, ‘negative affects may offer a platform for disrupting the status quo and create possibilities for change.’ (p. 108). By expressing our discomfort and unified anger, our alterethnographical reflections contribute to the *writing differently* literature (Gilmore, Harding, Helin, & Pullen, 2019; Grey & Sinclair, 2006).

Grounded in our evocative individual, collective and multi-voice alterethnography, our embodied, multifaceted gendered realities, collectively deconstruct gendered norms and binaries. In turn, our contribution is threefold. First, we empirically contribute our nonconformist embodied texts to problematise and challenge the marginalisation of particular voices and bodies within the academy. Second, through our collective “(Un)Muting”, our methodological contribution extends alterethnographical writing on *otherness* (Ericsson & Kostera, 2020). We begin with ‘love [as] the ethical position from which [our] writing differently springs’ (p. 2). Using our shared ethical positionality, we harness our (*dis*)*connected otherness* through mutual care, to enable our shared anger as a basis for

affective feminist solidarity (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). By sharing our disconnected experiences, the voice of our ‘deviating’ lived gendered realities, for which we pay the foibles of neoliberalism (Calás and Smircich, 2020), is reclaimed. Third, underpinned by a feminist approach to knowledge, and with commitment to transgressing the boundaries of ego, our collective gathering contributes to unmuting understanding and decolonising existing knowledge that symbolically annihilates people by disqualifying *different* bodies (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). It is such inclusive knowledge and collective organising that challenges, disrupts, and deconstructs binarism that holds the potential of (re)organising the amplified gendered hierarchies in times of crisis.

Method

Over the course of this collaborative work, six virtual meetings were held, beginning during the summer of 2020. Reflecting on our diverse gendered realities during the pandemic and with feminists’ awareness, we discussed the power differential inherent in our academic hierarchies to transcend this difference and transform our collaboration as a space not only for *shifting* power but also for *sharing* power.

Individual reflections were written, each based on our gendered, lived experiences and adopting an individualised ‘I’ voice, which were then shared. There was a common but varied theme of ‘*otherness*’ (Ericsson & Kostera, 2020); our experiences were each equally important. In our collective “(Un)Muting”, and through harnessing our *(dis)connected otherness*, we methodologically extend alterethnographical writing on *otherness* (Ericsson & Kostera, 2020). Our ‘messy writing’ (Ericsson & Kostera, 2020) represents our collective responsibility and covenant of care to each other. Through conveying our complex otherness and difference, and engaging in non-linear and anti-hegemonic writing, we contribute to the

emerging, feminist literature as a form of active subversion (Ahonen et al., 2020; Bloom & White, 2016).

To frame our collective discussion three question prompts were agreed via a shared drafting process drawing on our reflections and the continuing COVID-19 crisis: *How can our individual gendered experiences during the pandemic contribute to the reorganisation of gender after the pandemic? How do we perceive sharing our experiences with each other, and whether that has any further effect on how we perceive gender in society? How, or indeed have, our reflections of our experiences changed now we have entered the third lockdown?* Meetings were transcribed ad-verbatim, and then thematically analysed, before quotes that demonstrate our gendered lived experiences and affective response to the pandemic were selected. We identified relevant themes and subthemes and organised these adopting a pluralistic, shared approach (Frost et al., 2011), in particular to enable shared and multi-layered understandings of each other's experiences of muting and (un)muting. Individual reflections are ordered alphabetically and based on the timeframe between July - December 2020. Although living in these turbulent times meant that there is a continuous change to reflect upon, or add to, our initial individual reflections were not amended and instead capture a specific time and space and minimise 'academic formatting' (Pullen, 2018). Our paper now shifts from the collective 'we' to the individual 'I' to enable our individual experiences to stand alone, mirroring the sharing exercise we undertook as a collective, before returning to a collective narrative.

“I” & “Me” ... Individuals ... on “Muting”

Author A

10:45pm, 9th March 2020. My barefooted cold body on a bed, moving in a dark confined space that is slightly lit by flashing lights coming in from a tiny window with scarily loud siren. My arms wrapped around her very warm skin, while her little body was resting over my chest. I still remember this terrified look on her face, her shivering body, her tearful eyes wondering in a shock “*Mommy, I am scared*”. While I was holding her closer to my chest offering a comforting hug that I desperately needed, I said, “*I promise everything will be OK, I will always be here to protect you*”, I gave her a promise I was not certain I can keep. While my body was sorrowfully present with my 3-year-old daughter in the ambulance, my mind and heart were aching for her 13-year-old brother, who had to be left alone at home, worried sick about his sister, with no one around reassuring him. The medics said he is not allowed into the ambulance. I desperately explained “but I have no one here to stay with him, please let him in”, “call a relative or a friend”, “but I have no relatives or friends here, please let him in”, they asserted coldly “we are sorry, we cannot let him in”. All the way to the hospital, I pondered while my tears ran on my cheeks, will she be ok? How will he sleep alone? Will she survive? Who will wake him up to school, prepare him food? That night, I powerlessly sensed how cruel and brutal this world is for a single parent of two, an immigrant, a student, a foreigner.

Thankfully, my daughter survived. A few days later, I got COVID-19 symptoms. Till date, I have no clue if we have had the virus as back then testing was limited to those travelled overseas, been in contact with confirmed cases, or the powerful. Unfortunately, I was neither privileged to have someone to look after me, so I can rest, nor did I have an alternative childcare. With my high fever, fatigued and weak body, I was solely caring for my children. When my breathing got worse, I could not call the ambulance. Who would stay and care for my kids? I decided to risk my health, to take care of my kids and stayed home. With my persistent symptoms, I had to tell my son the ugly possibility, I might die. With a denying

sad face, he refused to let me advise him what to do if I died. So, I wrote a letter and asked him if anything happened to me to open it. I detailed who he should contact to get them back safely to my parents in Egypt. Reading this letter today, I am grateful for every breath I take around my children. We are lucky to survive this traumatic health experience when millions of people lost their lives or the lives of their loved ones.

My pandemic intersectional reality is an example of the gendered dimension of this pandemic. As the sole caregiver in my household, when schools/nurseries closed, I was caring for a toddler, home-schooling a teenager with a learning disability, queuing long hours for groceries when all online slots sold out, carrying out domestic work, entertaining my children, while attempting to adopt the inhumane “business as usual” logic. With boundaryless private and public spheres, being the single source of income in my household, and on a student visa, meant that I could not afford to quit, pause my studies, or reduce my working hours. I was teaching online, supporting my students, working on my PhD, attending supervision meetings, responding to many emails, while wrestling with time to ‘publish’ and ‘fit’ academia’s maleness model (Bourabain, Verhaeghe, & Stevens, 2020). For six months, I was drowning alone in an open-ended circle of responsibilities, going to bed every night with severe muscle aches, a dimmed soul, and a drained brain.

In this turbulent uncertain time, even permanent academics are losing their jobs (UB, 2020). Being a woman in a precarious position means that I am at elevated risk of unemployment, which exacerbates my anxiety. This anxiety is amplified by the existing ambiguity regarding my doctoral funding extension decision, so I either burn myself out to submit on time or face the economic consequences should the decision be against extending my funding. Then, I wonder, what role do academic institutions and funding bodies play to mitigate this gendered crisis and its effect on women in academia? Would they rethink structural and cultural change to the “business as usual” norm? or would they mute our voices

and further entrench the pre-existing inequalities, sexism and gendered racism in academia (Bourabain, Verhaeghe, & Stevens, 2020)?

You are on mute. A comment that I hear in today's virtual new 'norm', more than the faces I see on screen. With all my pandemic fatigue, anxiety and despair, the media mutes my pandemic struggle as a single parent, (in)visibilizing my experience rendering it invalid. Media's symbolic annihilation manifests in the omission of representation, which cultivates dominant assumptions about social existence (Coleman & Yochim, 2008; Tuchman, 1979). For instance, in WHEN's (2020) recent report documenting 'co-parenting' professionals' experiences of working and caring during the UK lockdown, my voice as a single parent was omitted, silenced. This selective omission of representation reinforces the dominant assumptions of idealised "nuclear family" as the absolute answer of social existence. In so doing, media privileges and normalises the two-parent household, while penalising and marginalising single parents' families, especially women, who do not fit the 'ideal'.

In 2019, there were 1.8 million single parents in the UK, which is around 25% of families with dependent children, and 90% of single parents are *women* (ONS, 2019). Excluding this big segment of single parents' voices is a discriminatory act that silences women's lived experiences, and further deepens the gendered implications of this crisis exacerbating inequalities. As a single parent, I see the above as violence that undermines my struggle as a woman and student immigrant. Muting my voice underestimates my exhaustion chasing after my toddler; the challenges to home-school a teenager with learning disability; the anxiety of the impact of the current situation on my funding and my employability; my burnout to get published with no guarantee to get a job; and the despair of surrendering my dream to build my professional career.

Author C

The current pandemic is, not only a pandemic but a disaster for equality, feminism, the gender pay gap, and the progress that has been made in terms of gender equality both in the home and the workplace. I am deeply fearful of regression around gendered division of labour in the home, childcare responsibilities, and responsibilities around caring for sick and/or elderly family members; women already bear the brunt of the swift move to home working and home-schooling, and the multitude of challenges with which that comes, as well as being further entrenched by the gender pay gap. For me, living in a single-sex household, where there are no caring responsibilities and the division of household labour has always been conducted equally and is based on strengths, desires, and skills. However, anecdotally, the stark picture I see from friends and family around division of labour in the home, home-schooling, overall hugely intensified responsibilities, and women's lived experiences of the pandemic, is bleak.

My own household is deeply egalitarian, perhaps rooted in a hyper-awareness of the inequalities oftentimes experienced by heterosexual couples, as well as couples with children. It is important to reflect upon our experiences, particularly around the egalitarian sharing of household labour and responsibilities, traditional gender roles and what can be learnt from a household which divides responsibilities based on existing skills and strengths, desires and ultimately, equality. We have the time and effort of two people available for the things that need doing, with no societal gender expectations or stereotypes surrounding who *should* carry out which tasks, albeit we have in the past been subjected to heteronormative comments and questions as to 'who is the man?' referring to doing things such as DIY, repairs, or even heavy lifting. Our labour is allocated according to our ability and availability, and divided fairly, rather than, critically, being influenced or driven by socially prescribed and enforced gender roles.

Whilst I am acutely aware of my own privilege during the pandemic (I am permanently employed, I have access to outdoor space, fast and stable internet, no children, any other long term caring responsibilities, as well as a dedicated workspace in my home), I did glean some insight into how quickly this can change when my partner contracted COVID-19 in March 2020. She was bed-ridden for just over four weeks, during which time I assumed all household tasks, as she became increasingly sick from COVID-19; we were quarantined separately. I slept, ate, worked, and rested in the same small room. I began to read Ahmet Altan's (2019) 'I will never see the world again' which was deeply moving and somehow encouraged me to see beauty in the mundane, in a small space. I became increasingly worried and unable to concentrate on my work; what might happen if she died. Thankfully, my partner did not die, she has recovered fully, and is not experiencing 'long covid' (Mahase, 2020). However, there is symbolic annihilation of the experiences of those who did not die from the virus or who may not have had to be intubated, but were still very sick and had to take longer periods off work to recover.

My own experiences feel less pertinent when I think of the experiences of those who are 'shielding' whom I think have been done a great dis-service during the pandemic, but also before, with a real lack of visibility and often being forgotten, symbolically annihilated, symbolic violence thrust upon them in the most dire of circumstances. This has nevertheless made me reflect on caregiving, and whilst the caregiving I engaged in was only for four or five weeks, I felt exhausted emotionally, and was also left wondering how people manage such roles in the longer term, and how the complexity of such situations may be further amplified if there are also children, precarious working, unsteady and or limited income, which is also potentially further amplified for women by the gender pay gap (Andrew et al., 2020). We are not only in a health crisis and economic crisis, but also at a critical juncture of future mental health crisis, in regard to burnout and that this will also have a notable

gendered dimension (Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020). Economic and social divisions and inequalities are already deeply embedded in British society, and the current COVID-19 pandemic is drastically contributing to societal inequalities, thereby setting the stage for further symbolic annihilations, as well as more extreme, long term, societal divisions.

News items have started to emerge of cases of alt-right homophobes planning to deliberately infect the LGBTQ+ community and people of colour with COVID-19 (Wakefield, 2020), which is not only deeply frightening and disturbing, but also personifies the weaponization of COVID-19, with ‘White, masculinist genre of political ‘truth-telling’ (Harsin, 2020, pp. 1061-1062) false beliefs and post-truth phenomena gaining traction. I worry about how this is also contributing to the portrayal of ‘reality’ by the media, and contributing to further annihilating any progress that has been made in terms of equality. As we find ourselves in an era of pseudo-populist, deeply Conservative politics, combined with the global pandemic, the stage is being set for deeper, longer term inequality.

There is much that can be learned from households where labour in the home is equally divided. The mainstream media in the UK has largely focussed on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on heterosexual couples, the idealised ‘nuclear family’, and in turn, the male breadwinner model; a more inclusive discourse is imperative not only for change, but to counter regressions in gender equality and contribute to re-calibrating the discourse around caring, and labour in the home.

Author B

I have always considered myself to be an ‘involved father’ and naturally embrace my nurturing attributes, however my identity has been transformed by my experiences of primary care during the England lockdowns. I have drawn on a few intersecting influences as an involved father, primarily through my own father’s influence and, to a lesser extent, cultural

and media influences. I have felt the presence of media discourses of fatherhood more acutely during this crisis period, especially in the context of my research on masculinities and parenting. It is through this lens that I have reacted to incidents of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979) of fatherhood in the UK media discourse. This annihilation has been expressed through the subtle silencing of fatherhood within media discussions of lockdown parenting in which fathers have become like ‘ghosts’ within our daily discourse (Kangas, Lämsä, & Jyrkinen, 2019). At a time when fathers have been doing more childcare than ever before (Fatherhood Institute, 2020), I am increasingly frustrated by this persistent media annihilation, which I feel reproduces patriarchal assumptions of fathers as secondary carers.

As the lockdown took effect, and most schools and nurseries were closed to all but essential workers, I joined many other parents in becoming a primary caregiver. It was hard work, and I finished many days exhausted from the physical and emotional impact of trying to squeeze care and work into 24 hours, usually by compromising sleep. Like many parents around the UK, my wife and I attempted to balance work commitments with childcare as best as we could, but it took its toll as the weeks turned into months (Author A & Author B, 2020). Despite this accumulation of daily fatiguing, the three months of lockdown were also an opportunity to spend quality time as a sole caregiver to my child. It is a time I will always remember and something I know many other parents will have benefited from too, though I am acutely aware of my privilege in contrast to many whose lives have been stretched beyond breaking point in such trying times.

As de-facto primary caregivers in UK, women have paid a high price during the UK lockdown (ONS, 2020), especially to the detriment of their careers, however this outcome is a direct consequence of longstanding structural gender inequalities and cultural norms surrounding childcare. As an advocate for counternarratives of caring masculinities, I was

saddened by the absence of reporting on the role fathers were playing during this crisis, especially given the unique experiences of enforced home working. I distinctly recall listening to an episode of BBC R4's 'Woman's Hour' in June 2020 during which a recent report from the Fatherhood Institute (FI) (2020) was summarily glossed over in lieu of important corollary evidence (Ford, 2020), which highlighted the disproportionate impact of the lockdown on women. This unbalanced juxtaposition of two reports sadly diminished the important increase in fathers' childcare being promoted by the FI, and maintained a heteronormative discourse concerning gendered caregiving roles and responsibilities in the UK.

When the mainstream media forgoes the opportunity to promote the role and responsibility of fathers as caregivers in common discourse, they reinforce patriarchal societal norms. Even feminist shows such as the Woman's Hour, whose output makes a hugely positive contribution to gender equality, can err in their presentation of masculinities in gender politics. Having spent a significant amount of time doing childcare, I know how important these caregiving experiences are in reshaping constructions of masculinities. The 'hands-on' caregiving that fathers do during times of crisis can contribute affective reformulations of their masculine identities, which can also challenge the ideal worker paradigm. My own experience of caregiving has rewritten my career plans to the extent that I now prioritise my role as the primary carer in my family. However, I am conscious that my individual experiences, and those of other caring fathers in the UK, are marginalised in the context of dominant media annihilations of fatherhood during the pandemic. This is a missed opportunity that I believe will only serve to reinforce fathers' roles as breadwinners first, and carers second.

In the continuing media frenzy surrounding the UK pandemic crisis, we may miss the opportunity to write a new, evidence-based script for fathers amongst the general

consciousness. Certainly, the legal barriers placed in front of parents, with new fathers barred from attending births in some cases (Sherwood, 2020), has sown the seeds for future post-traumatic stress for both men and women. I worry about how this period may impact the mental health of fathers, especially those who have experienced acute alienation from their children during these vital early moments of bonding. The value of fathers should never have been marginalized in this way and the cost may not be understood until it is too late.

Despite these troubling experiences of symbolic annihilation, I have sought refuge in the shared experience and sympathetic support of my peers and continue to gain much from this solidarity. I see great potential in these seeds of affective solidarity between working parents and marginalised peoples. This pandemic, traumatic though it remains, provides a context to build mutual care and solidarity that we all owe to each other. Such solidarity in care may continue as a new norm amongst working families and I know I will continue to seek and offer peer solidarity in the months ahead.

Author D

It's a Sunday morning and England is currently in a 2nd national lockdown due to the COVID-19 virus. It, the infection and the lockdown, hardly seem to have gone away for me: A few brief weeks when I could go to the shops and have a coffee in a local café whilst socially distancing and covering my face. And now things are back to a point where we may only go outside for essentials and where the difference for me is that I am no longer officially 'shielded' due to my underlying health.

Eight days from now I will travel to the far end of England from where I live; a journey of around 370 miles one way during lockdown permitted as it's for a medical appointment. Early in the hours of the 1st December I will undergo a surgical procedure at one of two specialist hospitals in England, both hundreds of miles from where I live but just

50 miles apart from each other. I will have 'gender affirmation surgery' after nearly six years of medicalised treatment by the NHS.

370 miles one way in a pandemic. I do not drive; I have no car. I will have to make my way by train, first to London and then to Brighton before getting a taxi to the hospital. I'm tested for COVID-19 before I travel and must socially distance to avoid infection during the journey.

And when I wake from the anaesthetic post-surgery I will be met by the doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff; visitors are not allowed during lockdown. I will not be able to see my partner, or any friends, for a further week until the hospital discharges me with a sick note for a minimum of six weeks recovery at home. This bitter birth into loneliness seems apposite for a no body who does not exist.

On the 1st December I will have vaginoplasty, a surgical procedure to construct a vagina from my inverted penis. The NHS believe that this will help affirm my gender identity so much that my Gender Identity Clinic have already spoken to me about when they may discharge me from their care. I will have surgery, or will I?

I am so close to a medicalised surgery that people think I must be both scared and elated. But I feel other emotions too. I am currently more than anything, anxious; my NHS GP practice were asked to arrange my pre-surgery tests over 1 month ago. They have yet to do this and time is running out. When I speak to them, they are dismissive and either refer me back to the hospital or tell me, 'ring back on Monday'. I'm caught between two services in a massive institution. My anxiety is complimented by extreme frustration at my inability as an individual to have a caring institution care about me.

Monday 8am I phone my GP as they asked. I'm on hold for 20 minutes to eventually be told, 'A doctor will phone you sometime this morning. Sometime between now and 12.'

It's now 11.30 and I am still waiting for the call, trying to cope with my growing frustration and anxiety. Why can't they just do the pre-surgery tests? I can feel my heart racing faster as I worry more and more that the tests will not be done in time and my surgery will be postponed. And as the clock ticks down my anxiety is complemented by depression and I feel like I've lost control, again. My nausea grows. I worry that the surgery I have waited six years for will be delayed yet again. I was approved for surgery 22 months ago and was told it would be within 6 months. Or will it be cancelled all together? When I was first referred for gender dysphoria in 2015 the English Government and society generally seemed to support trans people but nearly 6 years later things have changed. And in today's news the BBC report a story of a 14-year-old suing the NHS for the excessive time taken to treat them for gender dysphoria.

In 2015 the Government opened a consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 to consider how that Act might be reformed to take in to account the needs of transgender people more adequately and specifically how transgender people might be allowed to self-identify their gender. The consultation closed in 2016 and the Government was expected to report on the findings soon after. The report was 'sat on' until the Autumn of 2020 when Liz Truss, now Minister for Equality, decided, despite 70% of respondents being in favour of self-identification, not to support the report. Trans women cannot self-identify as women; trans men cannot self-identify as men; non-binary people do not exist. Truss, following a public outcry from LGBT rights groups in England, consented to open a second consultation, deadline for evidence set 10 days later, 27th November. The national media do not report this however choosing instead to publish more than 1000 transphobic stories between 2017-2020, which depict trans women as evil sex offenders, fetishists, abusers of (cis) women and worse. This national media obsession trivialises and condemns trans women to a symbolic

annihilation where they are figured as a dangerous other to, and intent on harming, ‘real’ women.

The apparent direction of travel of Trans Rights in England is regressive under the current Government. The consensus of opinion is that trans people will be denied a right to self-identify and there are fears that freedoms based on gender rights will be heavily curtailed by the Government – trans people will be banned from ‘single sex’ public spaces including toilets; existing equalities legislation will largely end, and; public institutions will cancel policies that support trans people in health, education, social care, etc.

As a non-binary person, I have never had these rights; I do not legally exist. What hope do I have if my trans niblings are increasingly discriminated against in an institutional system that repeats a gender purity spiral where some bodies deserve rights and others do not? A Governmental and consequent legal refusal to allow self-identification is fed by a national media intent on a symbolic annihilation of trans people as human. If trans people have their rights restricted further who else will suffer as ‘not pure enough’? At what point will only normative, read white, heterosexual, able bodied, neurotypical people be ‘pure’ enough to have bodies that matter?

In a week I am supposed to have surgery. It’s now gone midday and I’m still sitting here waiting for a phone call to (never) come. A body that doesn’t matter.

We now present our collective discussion drawing on Calás and Smircich (2020) muted, (un)muted and mutiny as a conceptual and analytical framework.

“We” ... Collective ... on “(Un)Muting” & “Mutiny”

Muted

Our collective discussion began with an open question to reflexively address our individual reflections: ‘*How can our individual gendered experiences during the pandemic contribute to the reorganisation of gender, after the pandemic?*’ The question steered us to the heteronormativity that we all highlighted as symptoms of patriarchy.

Author C: a lot of the discourse is really heteronormative. And a lot of the imagery is as well, you know, when you see on something like BBC News, it's like a little picture of a little house with a mum and a dad ... we're still at that level of thinking, and that idea of the nuclear family [...] an assumption that everybody who doesn't have children, has made that choice that they don't want them [...]

The persistent image of the nuclear family was brought into close focus during the pandemic with the Government’s egregious ‘stay home’ advert (BBC, 2021) which symbolised normativity and the trivialisation of patriarchal domestic relations. Our experiences of SA were interrelated with similar examples of patriarchal hegemony. Extending our consideration of muted experiences, Author D shared an example of how gender-based violence had been discussed and the underrepresentation of men as victims in media discourse.

Author D: On Women's Hour today, they had an interview with someone who was talking about domestic violence [DVA]. [...], it became this whole thing of women are the victims of domestic violence, and men are the perpetrators. That's true in the majority of cases, but it ignores that one third of DVA victims are males.

This topic led to further reflections from authors B and A on their sense of the effect of this muting on the reproduction of patriarchy and binarism in society:

Author B: in many ways [it] alienates the very people that you want to persuade and to bring on board. That's, that's often the kind of core frustration I feel [...]

Author A: [...] I think the focus of the media on the normalisation of certain aspects, and denormalization of the others is the reason why there is still binarism, that will be the status quo, so nothing changes.

The discussion of patriarchal normativity concluded with a sense of unease as we considered the oppressive hegemony that had expanded during the COVID-19 crisis. We turned, next, to concepts of unmuting as a way of expressing our collective response to this suppressive affect.

Unmuting

Author C shared a consciousness raising analogy (Ahmed, 2010; hooks, 2014) that helped us unpack the deceptive narrative of togetherness that proliferated the early days of the pandemic:

Author C: [...] we're all in the same storm, but some people are quite happily and securely on land, some people are on large boats, some people are on, you know, tiny little wooden rafts; for some people, it is really, also financially very, very difficult, perilous time, as well, on top of childcare, on top of health care, other health issues [...]

The differentiated experiences of people across the UK, and globally, is an example of SA against the patriarchal norm. From an intersectional perspective, people on the front line of healthcare services, doing the most intimate contact, are typically nurses who are predominantly women (RCN, 2018). This reflection drew a cultural comparison from Author A regarding the collective responses to crises in Egypt:

Author A: In Egypt, because we're very collective... it's not just about the extended family ...it might be even the whole neighbourhood. So, we have a saying, 'we are all in the same boat', but obviously in the UK, we are not, we are definitely not all in the same boat.

By discussing these disparities as a collective and then writing together, we reflexively (un)muted the experiences of marginalised 'others' beyond our immediate shared experiences. Author C and D continued this discussion below:

Author C: [...] people [are] in their own little 'bubbles' with very little regard for people outside their immediate family and that's quite concerning I think in a period of crisis, it's very easy to become blinkered on one's own environment and experience. So, I just think it helps to share, collectively to prevent this kind of self-gaze.

Author D: this goes back to the whole idea about binaries and stereotypes [...] when we use a label of single mother not all single mothers have the same experiences [...] We're always using gendered language and it doesn't actually capture all differences.

This discussion marked an important step in building our affective solidarity (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) in response to the gendered crisis as we oriented towards ‘mutiny’.

Mutiny

As we focussed on muting and inequities, our discussions shifted to existing theorisations of societal structuration and change:

Author D: One of the bits that could be quite interesting is the whole idea again, of structuration from Giddens (1984), but also overlapping into Butler (1990), where she talks about how it's iterative practices that bring about change in gender. What COVID-19 has actually been is a major crisis. And Giddens' point is that iterative small-scale changes tend to get lost because the small scales, they happen over a long period of time, you don't really actually realise that there's been any change at all because it's taken over such a long period, whereas, because what we've had with COVID-19 is a major, short-term crisis, which has required major change, you're already seeing institutions pushing back against those changes.

Author C: there's this whole discourse around that ... that some people are somehow more worthy of blame than others [...]

This point connects to the ideas of organizing based on acts of subversion, but these acts are subsumed within acceptable degrees of resistance, and contribute to the continuation of organisational control (Bloom & White, 2016). In our consideration of ‘mutiny’ a contribution is made to the counternarrative academic discourse (Özkazaç-Pan & Pullen, 2020) resisting patriarchal gender hegemony in this crisis, but we could also be subsumed

within an acceptable variance from the controlled, performative discourse of wider academia (Anderson et al., 2021).

As a collective we discussed how we could subvert this controlled discourse. Author A spoke of her experiences of cultural difference (Author A, 2021) and the importance of sharing lived experiences:

Author A: for me, spending 30 something years in the Middle East, in countries where being gay or being transgender, or even having these thoughts are considered as criminal act, when people are jailed for this. Yes, I read a lot. But reading is different from living it and seeing it [...] having a friend or a colleague who is writing about their experience is something different for me, it raises a lot of my mindfulness, my awareness of that other people are actually going through lots of struggles about so many things that's more important than childcare problems. It's about existence.

Authors B and D responded to this in the context of western exceptionalism to highlight how consciousness raising work within feminist activism is equally important in western contexts and with western academics:

Author B: In many ways, we don't have this in the UK. It's not, it's perhaps not as extreme in the UK. But there's still our existing attitudes of bigotry that, although not as overtly expressed, are still there, and I think it's still, I found it just as important to read the experiences of friends and colleagues, as I think you have [...]

Author D: [...] The whole idea of exceptionality which came from Jasbir Paur. Where us in the West have a tendency to think that it's other countries,

other than ourselves, that are abusive towards minorities, glossing repressive stuff we do in our own countries [...]

Raising awareness of some of our own exceptionalism within academia is a crucial aspect of our mutiny. As the conversation progressed further, we moved to a final question to consider whether our own experiences throughout the lockdowns, and the process of shared reflection, had been effective: *How, or indeed have, your reflections of your experiences changed over a period of reflection, now we have entered the third lockdown?*

Author A: [...] I feel lots of the people will start to consider giving up because you will start to feel actually it isn't worth all this stress. It isn't worth all this tiredness, it doesn't work. Not everyone will have the mental strength to be kind and nice [...] Those who are ready to abuse now would harass others, will now have more justification because the situation is hard [...]

Author A introduced the affects of exhaustion and stress impacting people's mental capacity to respond to the current crisis. This introduced the idea of fatigue as a precursor to other affects that could generate a different collective response to our original emphasis on mutual care. Author C introduced anger as a mutual affect that could engender collective responses to the gendered inequities we had discussed:

I think oftentimes that we don't kind of having this collective anger to drive for change [...] I think for me, my thinking is about my anger towards the state, my anger towards the systems is becoming intensified. And, I suppose, a stronger sense of frustration, and just tiredness really, as well as work intensification. But it's so multifaceted, all of those things come together.

Author C provides an uncomfortable assessment of the reality of the COVID-19 crisis, which we felt became a catalyst for new thinking in our collective organising. Ruddick

(2010) suggests ‘It is not the harmony of the senses that marks the possibility for thought, but their discord’ (p. 37) and our shift from hope and care, to fatigue and anger provided the impetus for a different collective energy in our collective discourse as Author B considered the importance of protecting our existing rights.

Author B: it's important to recognise the fragility of the hard-fought collective battles that have been won in the past and to keep focused on retaining some of that progress; civil rights, gender equality movements, retaining that and not losing grip on it over the months and years ahead [...]

Author D offered further consciousness raising information into the collective discourse at this stage, connecting to Pullen, Rhodes, and Thanem (2017) who suggest ‘negative affects may offer a platform for disrupting the status quo and create possibilities for change’ (p. 107).

Conclusion

We came together with a mutual appreciation of our shared values and an ethic of care oriented towards ‘hope’. This was the bedrock of our reflexivity during discussion meetings and provided a safe space into which we could share our vulnerable experiences of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979), providing readers with a psychological safe space through their own identification and recognition of otherness. In responding to this special issue, we sought to provide our writing as both a modus of (un)muting and a safe and inclusive platform for further conversations around care and collective responsibility in academic writing.

As we reflected individually and collectively on our shared experiences, the affects (Spinoza, 1994) of repulsion and anger emerged in response to the exacerbated inequities of marginalised *others* in patriarchal COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on this shift in our

collective affect towards ‘anger’ we draw on the work of Sara Ahmed and her problematisation of ‘happiness’ as a normative goal (Ahmed, 2010). As Ahmed states ‘The sorrow of the stranger might give us a different angle on happiness’ (p. 573), which we have translated to the affect of ‘hope’ as a common trope of academic activist writing . In our collective “(Un)muting” (Calás & Smircich, 2020), our disparate *othered* voices intensified our collective sadness and anger as ‘affects’ that can kindle collective resistance to gender hegemony. As feminists, we align with Ahmed’s statement ‘In challenging ideas about gender, feminists have already offered challenges to how happiness is defined, and by whom’(2010, p. 580). We problematise the hopeful project of mutual care that brought us together by first acknowledging its importance in creating a space for trust and solidarity in our collective, and second to highlight its limitations as an affect that can appropriately address gender inequity in times of crisis. As our anger and discomfort emerged, so did our collective resolve to resist as a form of care for each other. In effect, we have deferred ‘hope’ to the future in lieu of the immediate anger we shared in response to this crisis.

In sharing reflections of our lived experiences, we gained crucial insights into what symbolically annihilated (Tuchman, 1979) us individually and collectively in the context of patriarchal UK society. The uncomfortable terrain of shared reflections was collectively explored, to give each other permission ‘to leave the comfort zones of our traditional arenas of operation and venture onto less stable terrain, where a new thought, new practices and a new world become possible’ (Ruddick, 2010, p. 41). It was in this uncomfortable, shared space that we found a common anger to articulate our rising disillusionment (O’Donnell, 2020). There is great potential in this anger as a powerful ‘affect’ grounded in the principles of ‘feminist killjoys’ (Ahmed, 2010) to collectively address SA through our anger and contribute to the discourse surrounding exclusion and muting in academic writing, a contemporary form of SA (Müller, 2018) in the academy. Future research could explore the

potential of collective, justified anger at gender injustice as the fuel for ‘affective solidarity’ (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) to challenge gender normativity. We ‘hope’ that readers feel our visceral discomfort through their bodies, harnessing their anger to fuel their own action against gender injustice.

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