CLAPPING FOR CARERS: REPRODUCING INEQUALITY DURING COVID-19

SARAH SPELLMAN

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic rolls into its second calendar year, it seems an appropriate time to look at what COVID-era narratives can tell us about social values. A brief disruption to a society's way of conducting itself may easily be subsumed into the flow of collective life without much threat to existing structures, but what of an emergency of this scale and duration? What does it reveal about boundaries and stratifications of power, and how might it lead to their reinforcement, their destabilization, or elements of both?

One way to explore these questions is through ideas of risk and otherness, employed to contrast the discursive and economic treatments of 'essential' or 'key' workers in the UK. The socioeconomically marginalized status of many of these workers, which intersects with the way the UK has acted on notions of risk, lends itself to anthropologist Mary Douglas's work on risk theory, itself influenced by her writing on boundaries and the body (Lupton 2013). In what follows, I build on elements of Douglas's thinking to identify pandemic narratives that act as a form of positive or laudatory othering in reaction to risk. The dynamic I explore is one in which UK essential workers, including carers, supermarket workers and delivery drivers, many of whom are in low-wage, precarious roles, receive praise rather than the more negative forms of othering that are usually used in the reinforcement of marginalization (Lister 2004). As we have not seen significant signs of changes to the conditions leading to economic precarity, I argue that this appreciation of 'heroism' acts as a substitute for action against systemic disadvantage.

Risk and othering

Mary Douglas's cultural/symbolic perspective, Beck and Giddens' idea of the 'risk society' and Foucault's governmentality have provided the most significant scholarly theoretical frameworks for addressing social approaches to risk (Lupton 2013: 36). Douglas's work emphasizes the importance of the body, boundaries and otherness. Though this framework has been criticized as conservative (Datta, 2005) and static (Lupton 2013: 75), it can be useful in understanding how risk perceptions intersect with social and political realities, including marginalization through various forms of othering.

Socioeconomic othering is the creation of social distance through narratives of demarcation that hinge on power (Lister 2017). This othering process is 'imbued with negative value

judgements that diminish and construct "the poor" variously as a source of moral contamination, a threat to be feared, an "undeserving" economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species to be explored' (ibid.: para 6). Qualitative empirical research carried out by Chase and Walker (2013) among UK adults in poverty has explored the sometimes complex ways in which shame linked to relative poverty and how it is co-constructed and internalized by those in poverty. One effect of othering rooted in economic status is the drawing of attention away from structural factors and towards perceived individual shortfalls in a way that helps to perpetuate socially stratified discourses of 'them' and 'us' such as the trope of the deserving and undeserving poor.

In liberal market economies with increasing inequalities of wealth, such as the UK's (McGovern et al. 2020), those in 'low-skilled' jobs are at a disadvantage both socially and financially. Alongside earning a low income, a body of research indicates that these workers face a social reality in which 'respondents hold more negative attitudes towards low-skilled than high-skilled workers regardless of respondents' own educational levels and income' (Fernández-Reino et al. 2020: S386). Access to social capital is also reduced due to restricted access to contacts who may be able to assist with job or educational opportunities (Leo et al. 2016). Workers who have become essential to the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic entered it already facing the linked disadvantages of social othering, relatively low wages and a lack of social capital.

It is therefore clear that in the COVID-19 era, the bodies we put at greatest risk are those that are already at risk of poorer life outcomes along the interrelated axes of wealth, health and social status. The identification of risk as part of a nexus incorporating power and boundary-making forms the basis for this analysis of the reproduction of inequalities through the laudatory othering of essential workers during the pandemic.

The challenges of essential work during COVID-19

In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (2020) defines essential workers as those in sectors including health and social care, education and childcare, utilities, food and necessary goods, transport and key public services. In this essay, the term is used to describe those carrying out roles that require them to be physically present outside their homes in order to work, with a particular emphasis on workers in low-paid and so-called low-skilled roles. These workers are unlikely to have the option of transferring to home working, nor the financial resources that allow them to stop working. Although many better-paid health-care workers like doctors, nurse-managers, dentists and hospital consultants fall into the essential worker category, they are not the main focus of this analysis. Here too, however, there is a disconnect between the narrative and material

realities, perhaps illustrated most sharply by concerns about supplies of potentially life-saving personal protective equipment (PPE) for health-care workers (*The Lancet* 2020).

Now that we know more about how COVID-19 infections spread, it is clear why those on lower incomes are at increased risk. These individuals are more likely to live in high-occupancy accommodation and to work in jobs requiring their physical presence, often including exposure to members of the public, and to travel to work on public transport as a necessity. These factors make it more difficult to socially distance and avoid infection. In the US, a country in which low-income workers face many of the same challenges as in the UK, one study found that social distancing is highly variable by income and that 'wealthier areas decreased mobility significantly more than poorer areas' (Weill et al. 2020: 19658).

The intersectional, compounding nature of economic disadvantage means that migrant workers and people of colour are more likely to be in low-paid work in the UK. In 2019 migrants were over-represented in health and social work, hospitality and transport (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo, 2021). In a data analysis exploring the effects of emergencies on migration policy, Fernández-Reino et al. (2020) consider the potential implications of the current pandemic for UK economic migration, pointing out that the UK has a long history of recruiting workers from abroad to fill roles now regarded as essential, particularly in the National Health Service (NHS). The uncertainties surrounding the UK's exit from the European Union have piled extra economic burdens on some essential migrant workers, which could further compound the intersectional load of disadvantage.

Circumstances leading to the deaths of some essential workers, such as that of UK railway employee Belly Mujinga, who eventually died from COVID-19 after reportedly being coughed or spat at deliberately by a passenger, have been highlighted in the press (Croxford 2020). However, this focus on a few individual cases may have inadvertently helped to obscure the scale of essential work in the national consciousness as employers adapt – or fail to adapt – their operations to COVID-19 infection risks. A *Financial Times* investigation (O'Connor 2020) found that the way the UK Health and Safety Executive approaches outbreaks in workplaces means that employers are unlikely to face consequences for not reporting COVID-19 clusters. The same investigation quotes a former staff member saying of a friend who was still working at a factory that had suffered multiple outbreaks, 'She's scared to go to work, but on the other hand, she needs to go to work' (O'Connor 2020), thus highlighting the disparities in COVID-19 risk-minimization opportunities among different segments of the working population.

Reproducing inequality through laudatory othering

In May 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote of essential workers that 'They are the best of us, punctuating each day with a million acts of love and kindness' (Prime Minister's Office and Johnson 2020). The Clap for Carers initiative, launched by London resident Annemarie Plas in March 2020 and lasting for ten weeks with support from the Prime Minister and the royal family, was set to return in January 2021 under the new moniker of Clap for Heroes (BBC 2021). Weekly doorstep applause initially framed as an expression of support for NHS staff, Clap for Carers was expanded to include workers sustaining the economy's most vital functions. Though postponed due to the ongoing lockdown, in April 2020 Virgin Radio announced a 'Big Thank You Tour' of concerts, with free tickets to be offered to essential workers. Virgin Radio's content director Mike Cass framed the tour as thanking workers, 'from our brilliant bus drivers and posties to the amazing shop staff and delivery drivers' (Clarkson 2020).

These are just a few of many examples of the narrative of the heroic essential worker that have been constructed in UK society during COVID-19. The pandemic has not only made visible the risk of COVID-19 exposure among those doing work deemed economically essential, it has also exposed the often strenuous and precarious nature of this work and the other risks entailed by it. Additionally, rather than attracting negative characterizations – low-skilled, under-educated, expendable – the essential worker is valorized, drawing praise from the media, politicians, royalty and the general public. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of reverse othering, in this case laudatory, dominated by themes of gratitude and the attribution of virtue.

Despite this widespread rhetorical valorization, the UK has not (or not yet) seen significant discussions of structural changes – a higher living wage or further regulation of precarious 'gig economy' contracts, for example – emerging alongside the applause. That being so, I believe it is reasonable to ask whether one effect of laudatory othering is, in a sense, to facilitate a trade – temporary enhancement of social status in exchange for exposure to a degree of risk not faced by those in more secure economic conditions.

Examining this exchange through the lens of Mary Douglas's work on boundaries and the body can help illuminate the ways in which existing social hierarchies are maintained in times of increased risk. She argues in *Natural Symbols* that the body is 'always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension' (Douglas [1970] 2003: 78). Cultural constructs of risk and otherness are expressions of the dominant social order, as she has shown in her ethnographic work on pollution rituals (Douglas [1966] 2013).

This order is reflected in the variation in exposure to acceptable risk we grant to bodies of correspondingly varying socioeconomic status. As the definition of 'essential' has been reshaped through the pandemic's foregrounding of the corporeal, material nature of human life, socially higher-status work has been shown to be less important than essential work to the immediate functions of the economy; at the same time, those in higher-status roles may work from home, shielded from risk. These workers have not only retained the privileges inherent in their status, they have in fact attained a new iteration of privilege – protection from COVID-19 risk through physical separation – which re-entrenches the dichotomy between secure and precarious labour.

Dissonance is also found in the tension between laudatory othering and interpretations that resist it: the founder of the Clap for Carers initiative has distanced herself from its 2021 reincarnation after negative comments on social media about the inadequacy of applause without accompanying action on pay or PPE provision. However, it appears the most visible strands of objection have been centred around health-care workers, with, in one example, Labour Party leader Keir Starmer tweeting 'Once again we took to our doorsteps to #ClapForOurCarers. But clapping isn't enough. They need to be paid properly and given the respect they deserve' (Starmer 2021).

Self-protective power structures

Why have we not seen significant signs of change in response to the inequalities, given the new emphases brought about by the conditions of the pandemic? Douglas's previously discussed work on the reproduction of the social order provides a window into social processes that contribute to the maintenance of a social status quo, one in the UK constituted in part by sharp socioeconomic stratification. However, her work also addresses the political dimensions of risk; in 'Risk and Blame', she writes (2002 [1992]: 53) that 'the political aspect of risk cannot be concealed any longer.' Within the Douglasonian risk-theory framework, which can be described as structuralist and critical realist (Lupton 2013), socioeconomically mediated variability in workers' exposure to risk demands an interrogation of the ways in which capitalist structures regulate flows of economic power.

On this theme, Navarro (1976) observes that in capitalist societies there is a tendency for bourgeois ideologies to promote the setting of parameters that subordinate health-care systems to the needs of capital accumulation. Systemic change that would threaten this aim is not considered. Instead, there is an emphasis on individual interventions in illnesses that may in fact be driven in large part by a society's economic structures (ibid.). Although Navarro is addressing the relationship between health-care and neoliberal capitalism, I suggest that the concept of hegemonic

social discourses acting to shift the focus towards individual behaviour and away from institutional power is relevant to any examination of the economic dimensions of laudatory othering.

Conclusion

During a time of great crisis, it is not surprising to find members of the public wanting to applaud carers and other essential workers sustaining key social functions. However, this impulse sits within a wider context of inequality that is reproduced in part through popular and institutional COVID-19 discourses informed by socially ordered risk calculations. Despite the heroic reception of essential workers by the public and the state, there have been no substantive moves toward changes to pay, conditions or precarity. Some have asked whether COVID-19's impact on UK society will serve as a spark for change in public attitudes to low-paid workers (*The Lancet* 2020). It is possible that this will come to pass, but if it does not, laudatory othering may merely have served to maintain social inertia and perpetuate pre-pandemic distributions of power. I give the last word to Mary Douglas:

> It may be a general trait of human society that fear of danger tends to strengthen the lines of division in a community. If that is so, the response to a major crisis digs more deeply the cleavages that have been there all the time.
> (Douglas 2002 [1992]: 34)

References

BBC. 2021. Lockdown: clap for carers to return as clap for heroes. BBC News.

Clarkson, N. 2020. Virgin Radio announces Big Thank You Tour for COVID-19 key workers | Virgin [WWW Document]. Virgin.com. URL https://virgin.com/about-virgin/latest/virgin-radio-announces-big-thank-you-tour-covid-19-key-workers (accessed 1.13.21).

Croxford, R. 2020. Belly Mujinga's death: searching for the truth. BBC News.

Datta, R.P. 2005. Book Review of Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger*. *Anthropological Theory* 5, pp. 301–2. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499605055724

Douglas, M. 2002 [1992]. *Risk and blame: essays in cultural theory*. London: Taylor & Francis.

— 2003 [1970]. *Natural symbols: explorations in cosmology*. London: Taylor & Francis.

— 2013 [1966]. *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315015811

Fernández-Reino, M., Rienzo, C. 2021. Migrants in the UK labour market: an overview [WWW Document]. Migr. Obs. URL https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market-an-overview/ (accessed 1.13.21).

Fernández-Reino, M., Sumption, M., and Vargas-Silva, C. 2020. From low-skilled to key workers: the implications of emergencies for immigration policy. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 36, S382–S396. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa016

The Lancet, 2020. The plight of essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet* 395, 1587. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31200-9

Leo, Y., Fleury, E., Alvarez-Hamelin, J.I., Sarraute, C., and Karsai, M. 2016. Socioeconomic correlations and stratification in social-communication networks. *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* 13, 20160598. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2016.0598

Lister, R., 2004. *Poverty* (Key Concepts). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lupton, D. 2013. *Risk* (2nd edn.). London: Routledge.

McGovern, P., Obradović, S., and Bauer, M.W. 2020. Income inequality and the absence of a Tawney moment in the mass media [WWW Document]. URL https://www.lse.ac.uk/International-Inequalities/IIII-Publications (accessed 1.15.21).

O'Connor, S. 2020. Key workers must be kept safer in COVID's second wave [Europe Region]. *Financial Times* 17.

Prime Minister's Office, Johnson, B. 2020. Prime Minister's article in *The Mail on Sunday,* 17 May 2020 [WWW Document]. GOV.UK. URL

https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-article-in-the-mail-on-sunday-17-may-2020 (accessed 1.13.21).

Starmer, K. 2021. Once again we took to our doorsteps to #ClapForOurCarers. But clapping isn't enough. They need to be paid properly and given the respect they deserve. The vaccine brings us hope, and we thank the NHS workers, army, volunteers and all those supporting the roll out. #ClapForHeroes. @keir_starmer. URL https://twitter.com/keir_starmer/status/1347279438715760640 (accessed 1.20.21).

Weill, J.A., Stigler, M., Deschenes, O., and Springborn, M.R. 2020. Social distancing responses to COVID-19 emergency declarations strongly differentiated by income. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 117, pp. 19658–19660. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2009412117

Williamson, E.J., Walker, A.J., Bhaskaran, K., Bacon, S., Bates, C., Morton, C.E., Curtis, H.J., Mehrkar, A., Evans, D., Inglesby, P., Cockburn, J., McDonald, H.I., MacKenna, B., Tomlinson, L., Douglas, I.J., Rentsch, C.T., Mathur, R., Wong, A.Y.S., Grieve, R., Harrison, D., Forbes, H., Schultze, A., Croker, R., Parry, J., Hester, F., Harper, S., Perera, R., Evans, S.J.W., Smeeth, L., and Goldacre, B. 2020. Factors associated with COVID-19-related death using OpenSAFELY. *Nature* 584, pp. 430–436. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2521-4