

# COVID-19 Secure Guidance: Organizational Decision Making and Politics in a Public Health Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

23 March 2021, a year since the first “work from home” government instruction so as to rein the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic in the United Kingdom. On 25 March 2020, the Coronavirus Act 2020 gained Royal Assent, came into law and it is a parliamentary consensus that the Act has beneficially enhanced the ability of public bodies to implement measures to save lives. In a commitment to continuously review the COVID-19 secure guidance that operationalizes the Act, the One Year Report on the Status on the Non-devolved Provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 was presented to Parliament in March 2021. In parallel response to the Government’s review of measures implemented to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, organizational theorists have investigated the management of compliance with these containment efforts. Bounded rationality, the classical rational choice critique, as espoused by Herbert A. Simon, is a spurious penchant given its inadvertence of structural formulation. Primarily informed by a critical realist approach to the politics of organizational decision-making this article identifies limitations in rational choice theory, coupled with gender blind technological determinism, as insufficiently recognised determinants of compliance with COVID-19 secure workplace guidance.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; SARS-CoV-2; Public health; Lockdown

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution and contagious transmission of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) reported initially in December 2019 in the Wuhan, Hubei province China rapidly escalated into a catastrophic global public health crisis. Globally, as of 23rd April 2021, 3,066,113 COVID-19 deaths have been reported to the World Health Organization, including 127,345 recorded deaths in the United Kingdom [1]. The Coronavirus pandemic has increased exponentially the exposure of healthcare systems to becoming overwhelmed. Consequently, governments throughout the world have instituted into statute restrictions at the level of economy, employment and society in order to protect national healthcare and abate an emergency crisis of provision. The United Kingdom’s Coronavirus Act 2020, instigated as a legislative response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has necessitated a profound impact on business operations, organizational inter-personal dynamics and decision-making. On 25th March, the Coronavirus Act 2020 achieved Royal Assent

and is defined in law as: “An Act to make provision in connection with coronavirus; and for connected purposes” [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020 had declared, the unprecedented spread of the acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), a global pandemic of the coronavirus disease, COVID-19. In September 2020 the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, by command of her Majesty, presented to Parliament: The Coronavirus Act Analysis. Comprehensive and concise the document provides a political background for the government’s “coronavirus action plan” and context for the institution of the Coronavirus Act 2020 upon which is conferred the legal power to issue temporary closure decisions. For, it is documented that the Government’s “4-Stage Strategy: contain, delay, research, mitigate” deemed it necessary to formulate legislation “in order to give public bodies across the UK the tools and powers they need to carry out an effective response” to the pandemic.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

On the 23rd March 2020 the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom announced the first of a series of national lockdowns: “The coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades and therefore I urge you at this moment of national emergency to stay at home protect our NHS and save lives” [3]. The organizational implications of the Coronavirus Act 2020, legislative ascription to government, power to issue COVID-19 secure workplace closure directions are unprecedented in peacetime. Covered by the auspices of “temporary closure of educational institutions” the Coronavirus Act 2020, “makes provision enabling the Secretary of State and the Welsh ministers to give directions for the restriction of attendance of premises used for the provision of education or childcare”; additionally, under aegis of “power to issue directions relating to events, gatherings and premises” the Act confers power to issue closure directions to businesses and organizations etc., [2]. The immediate consequence of exercising these powers has been a remarkable disjuncture in organizational decision-making; and these innovations are rapidly habituated given the built-in longevity of the Act’s ascription. For, it has been stipulated that the Act’s ascription to government, the power to temporarily close educational institutions: “needs to be retained (for at least the full 2 year period specified in the Act) to support the Secretary of State for Education (SoSfE)’s ability to actively, quickly and effectively manage responses to coronavirus outbreaks, e.g. if there are further outbreaks or peaks in cases. The DfE (Department for Education) view is that the s.37 temporary closure power needs to be retained to support the SoSfE’s ability to actively and effectively manage our response to COVID-19 outbreaks” (ibid. 26). Beyond educational institutions the Coronavirus Act’s ascription, to government, the power to subject to closure “cultural events, gatherings and premises” has also achieved an aspect of longevity, when expressed as follows: “Although DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture Media and Sport) have not yet used these powers, there is a strong agreement that they should remain as the situation is still evolving and could be used by any government department should it be needed” (ibid. 29). Indeed, the two years life span of the Coronavirus Act 2020 provides indication of its juridical longevity and enduring implications for organizations across all sectors. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the long-term organizational implications of the interim guidance measures introduced as a consequence of the Coronavirus Act 2020. Of particular significance are the existent and anticipated outcomes of the rational choice modelling and techno-deterministic remote working frameworks implicit within key aspects of the COVID-19 secure working guidance pertaining to organizational decision-making processes within the context of a public health global pandemic.

### Coronavirus Act 2020: Organizational decision-making and the politics of COVID-19 secure guidance

Central to the UK government’s early response to the COVID-19 pandemic is the Coronavirus Act 2020 and coterminous regulations under the Public Health (Control of

Disease) Act 1984 [4]. Substantial aspects of the Coronavirus Act 2020 are intended to alleviate the burden on frontline National Health Service (NHS) primary and social care provision. In addition to these measures “the Act significantly enhanced the ability of public bodies across the UK to provide an effective response to tackle this (COVID-19) pandemic”. Beyond moderating the surge of demand on frontline NHS services, the Act is intended to reduce pressure of delivering non-critical tasks health workers perform; and in so doing facilitating their ability to work remotely, less encumbered by office workplace bureaucratic procedures. In accordance with the government’s stated COVID-19 public health strategy objective, “to delay and flatten the peak of the pandemic by bringing forward the right measures at the right time”, demarcations intended to “reduce unnecessary social contacts” were instituted: “for the period required to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic” (ibid. 12). Consequently, the Act enabled the governments of the UK to limit public access to recreational spaces; prohibit mass gathering events and impose restrictions on people inhabiting enclosed premises. On 23rd March 2020, the UK government’s ad interim power to restrict public gatherings spectacularly came into effect as the UK became subject to its first COVID-19 national lockdown. Whereby, public transport systems, educational establishments, hospitality, non-necessary retail and office buildings were subject to a public health precipitated lockdown. The impact of the pandemic on the UK labor force was unparalleled in peace-time; and the Act sort to mitigate the immediate predicament of an ailing workforce stricken by sickness and an ailing workforce enfeebled by the necessary curtailments imposed on in-person work. With regards to the former, adjustments to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) provision were retrospectively implemented from 13th March 2020 and were designed primarily to ensure “that people receive SSP from the first day that they are off work due to coronavirus” and small businesses were awarded “refunding” so as “to alleviate the significant financial burden on employers through increased SSP costs”. Of specific relevance to the purposes of the case study analysis, the Coronavirus Act 2020 instigated a series of government guidance for superintending COVID-19 workplace biosecurity; several key guidance features were directed at organizational decision-making. The following case study discussion themes review, utilizes critical realist perspective, in its evaluation of existing and anticipated aspects of organizational political decision-making that have irreversibly transformed as a consequence of the implementation of COVID-19 secure working. Whereby, critical realism refers here to a theoretical framework that recognizes structured inequalities and agency as co-determinants of organizational decision-making politics.

### “COVID-19 secure” guidance: Risk assessment political decision-making beyond rational choice

The Coronavirus Act 2020 guidance provision in terms of work and organizations mainly pertains to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme [5] and the stipulation: “everyone who can work from home must do so”. It is one’s proposition, that the latter condition of the Act’s guidance has profoundly transformed organizational structures, dynamics and decision-

making. Prior to exploring these ramifications, it is necessary to briefly outline: Working safely during Coronavirus (COVID-19) [6]. Working safely during Coronavirus (COVID-19) published in May 2020, provides guidance, applicable to England, on COVID-19 biosecurity relevant to “people who work in or run offices, contact centres and similar indoor environments” [7]. In addition to the guidance’s priority actions of Test and Trace, social distancing and contact surface sanitation, organizations are instructed, in their COVID-19 biosecurity reasonable adjustments, as thus: “Complete a COVID-19 risk assessment”. It is one’s assertion that this guidance’s superintendence of COVID-19 risk assessment impacts directly on organizational decisions and makes apparent the limits of rational choice modelling of decision-making processes. Indeed, the specification of the COVID-19 risk assessment guidance refer directly to organizational decision-making and the impracticability of achieving perfect knowledge. For example, consider the integration of politics into the following aspect of the COVID-19 secure guidance specification:

“Risk assessment during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. As an employer, you must protect people from harm. This includes taking reasonable steps to protect your workers and others from coronavirus. This is called a COVID-19 risk assessment and it’ll help you manage risk and protect people. You must:

- Identify what work activity or situations might cause transmission of the virus
- Think about who could be at risk
- Decide how likely it is that someone could be exposed
- Act to remove the activity or situation, or if this isn’t possible control the risk

If you have fewer than five employees, you don’t have to write anything down, but it might help if you do. You should update your COVID risk assessments to reflect any changes in legislation or guidance that may impact how you carry out your work activity, for example if there is a change in local or national restrictions” [7].

Mainstream rational choice theory, postulates the existence of a decision-making subject that can successfully achieve reasoned judgement through the knowledgeable evaluation of germane aspects of their environment. Rational choice presumption is in evidence in the COVID-19 guidance on risk assessment decision-making; as revealed through an application of a “bounded rationality” [8] critique of the behavioral model of rational choice. Thus, for example, Herbert A. Simon (ibid. 99) critically observes that the presumed homo economicus of rational choice models has access to “a well-organized and stable system of preferences, and a skill in computation that enables him to calculate, for the alternative courses of action that are available to him, which of these will permit him to reach the highest attainable point on his preference scale”. Thus, the calculation of a maximum value outcome requires rational knowledge pertaining to: “(1) the set of alternatives open to choice, (2) the relationships that determine the pay-offs (‘satisfactions’, ‘goal attainment’) as a function of the alternative that is chosen, and (3) the preference-orderings among pay-offs” (ibid. 100). Consider in this respect, the following COVID-19

risk assessment guidance: “If you have fewer than five employees, you don’t have to write anything down, but it might help if you do” [7]. One might suggest that within this latter statement resides an attempt to reconcile inherent contradictions in rational choice i.e., that the environment is both a given and constraint to rational decision-making; furthermore, in the absence of actual empirical evidence of a successful rational choice maximization it would appear “the actual process is quite different from the ones the rules describe”. It is therefore plausible to anticipate “modifications that appear (on the basis of casual empiricism) to correspond to observed behavior processes in humans, and that lead to substantial computational simplifications in the making of a choice”. Returning to the extract from the COVID-19 risk assessment guidance and its suggestion that assessors in certain circumstances can limit recorded data inputs. The introduction of the simplification exhibits a compelling similarity to the “dynamic adjustment over a sequence of choices” that constitutes the actual decision-making processes of human beings in a dynamic system (ibid. 112). Whereby the simplification infers recognition of limitations posed by the external environment; i.e., “constraints that define the problem of rationality for the organism”. Furthermore, the environment boundary to rationality can involve the intersection of cognition with “the skin of the biological organism” (ibid. 101). Specifically, it is stated: “Because of the psychological limits of the organism (particularly with respect to computational and predictive ability), actual human rationality-striving can at best be an extremely crude and simplified approximation to the kind of global rationality that is implied, for example, by game-theoretical models” (ibid.). Elsewhere, Odih [9] has examined consumer culture, wearable technologies and the body as a boundary limitation to the calculability of financialized risk. For, present purposes the application to the analysis of COVID-19 secure guidance of Herbert A. Simon’s “examination of the schemes of approximation that are actually employed by human and other organisms” provides basis of further empirical evidence of the limitations of rational choice theory. Indeed, an analysis of organizational decision-making politics as bounded by “the skin of the biological organism” is potentially an apposite theoretical framing; but from a critical realist framework it falls short of recognizing the co-determinant features of structure and agency. For, the coronavirus disease COVID-19 is both an organic and nonorganic visceral boundary limitation to a human being’s capacity to achieve rational choice decision-making.

Direct parallels exist in respect to the rational prerequisites and maximizing calculative decision-making of COVID-19 biosecurity organizational risk assessment and the “administrative man” of rational choice management theory. Whereby, both are predicated on the unquestioned existence of “global rationality” Herbert A. Simon proposes an alternative framework, which has been of some appeal to the analysis of COVID-19 secure risk assessment and political decision-making. Indeed, it is evident that the continued prevalence of micro-level political decision-making analysis resonates with an approach to rational choice that preferences “inquiring into the properties of the choosing organism” rather than “inquiring into the environment of choice”. In the 1955 publication of a Behavioral

Model of Rational Choice, the micro-level analysis of choice is the self-professed intention of Herbert A. Simon, whereby any empirical existence of a computational decision-making consciousness is disputed because logically the actual process cannot be completely separated from the human unconscious (ibid. 104). Nevertheless, the possibilities of a modified form of rational choice are proffered in order to provide a correspondence “to observed behavior processes in humans, and that lead to substantial computational simplifications in the making of a choice”. For, it is contended that the constraints on rational choice are outcomes of an individual’s computational capacity, which forms a boundary to “rational choice under particular circumstances”. Conversely, in the above described government guidance for COVID-19 secure, risk assessment the rational choice model in operation appears oblivious of boundaries to achieving maximum calculation in decision-making. For, as has been detailed: “if we assume the global kinds of rationality of the classical theory the problems of internal structure of the firm or other organization largely disappear” (ibid. 114). Given that in reality the internal dynamics of a political persuasion never entirely dissipate the operating model of decision-making can only achieve “approximate rationality”. Thus, in the application of Herbert A. Simon’s framework to the analysis of political decision-making and COVID-19 risk assessment there is already some evidence to confirm the supposition: “This organism’s simplifications of the real world for the purposes of choice introduce discrepancies between the simplified model and the reality; and these discrepancies, in turn, serve to explain many of the phenomena of organizational behaviour” (ibid. 114). Contemporary application, of “administrative man” as a critical framework in respect to the COVID-19 pandemic and organizational decision-making, has immense potential. However, research studies adopting this theoretical framework are few and far between. Furthermore, among those studies that have applied a concept of rationality as bounded, management theorists have tended towards micro-level analysis, in so doing have marginalized and or neglected the relevance of structural analysis.

### **“COVID-19 secure” guidance: Remote working technologically mediated politics of decision-making**

Assessing the impact of COVID-19 secure measures on organizational dynamics, an unintended outcome of social distancing measures has been an irrevocable disruption in the proximal materiality of the conditions of decision-making. For example, consider the reconfiguring of decision-making proximal materiality invoked by the following guidance objective: “Ensuring workers maintain social distancing (2 m, or 1 m<sup>+</sup> with risk mitigation where 2 m is not viable) wherever possible, including while arriving at and departing from work and while in work” [7]. One’s experience and or expectation of office-based work prior to the COVID-19 social distancing measures, framed the archetypical forum of organizational decision-making within the context of an in-personal meeting in material space and synchronous time. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions the rules of social distancing restricted in-person close proximal organizational gatherings and in so doing irrevocably disrupted the spatial and temporal context of the

progressivist transparent, decision-making forum and undermined the situational machinations of political decision-making. Social distancing is an antilogic in respect to the proximal gathering and in-person dialogic principles of the progressive organization. For, as per the progressivist discourse of modern organizations proximity in time and space expresses a coming together and visual transparency in decision-making. The COVID-19 secure workplace guidance, conversely insisted on socially distancing colleagues, into a blend of unreal/real proximal spaces and (a) synchronic timeframes. Boardrooms, conference and meeting rooms with their strategically placed chairperson and scribes needed to be recomposed as per guidance to “maintain social distancing in the workplace wherever possible”. The progressive organizational ethos of transparent, dialogic exchange also succumbed to reconfiguration, as organizations seek to recreate open discussion forums that account for the COVID-19 secure guidance to acknowledge “those with protected characteristics as social distancing may not be possible or will be more challenging for workers with certain disabilities, such as individuals in wheelchairs or with visual impairments” (ibid.). Furthermore, the sprawling parameters of social distancing mitigate against preserving a delineation of space and time marked out for the purposes of decision-making within an archetypical meeting forum. For instance, the COVID-19 secure guidance states: “Social distancing applies to all parts of a business or home, not just the room where the service is delivered, but waiting rooms, corridors and staircases, where applicable”.

Information Communication Technology (ICT) has been an enabler of homeworking, providing socially and spatially distanced employees with a remotely accessibly medium through which to reconfigure organizational processes and decision-making. In their modeling of Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN), the Office of National Statistics provides insights into homeworking and technology. Firstly, the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic first lockdown on homeworking was colossal: “During the period 9 April to 20 April 2020, the OPN found that 45% of adults in employment said they had worked from home at some point in the last week” (ONS). Secondly, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing disparities in access to technology specifically designed for remote working. Indeed, this is inferred in ONS comparative and extrapolated analysis of the E-commerce Survey, specifically it is stated that “less than half of all employees were provided with a portable device for work, except in the information and communication industry” (ONS). Extrapolating from the 2018 E-commerce Survey and 2019 Office of Communication study, the ONS identify that when operationalized in terms of internet speed, type of job and sector employed: “homeworking in London appears more possible than in other regions”. The general inference of the ONS’s report entitled, Technology Intensity and Homeworking in the UK, is that: “The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has put an increased focus on the manner in which people work”. Whereby the COVID-19 pandemic is anticipated to have accelerated a normalization of the incorporation into our working lives, the use of digital technologies to accomplish an increasing proportioning of economically productive labor into remotely delivered,

homeworking. And in so doing, rapidly advanced awareness of latent problems associated with the computerized mediation of organizational inter-personal relation and decision-making processes.

Blanchard [10] provides an example of recent micro-level analysis of cognitive dissonance and psychological stress problems arising in the context of the migration from in-person to remote computer mediated organizational decision-making. Psychology and the increased prevalence of mental health issues feature in other research such as Zhang et al.'s [11] study of the capacity of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to conduct in-depth mining of ICT systems to provide from employees, user-generated insights relevant for the syndromic surveillance of their mental health. Similarly, Herath and Herath [12] identify "lessons for technology management and governance" of the mental health consequences of employees' coping with work intensification imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Zhang et al., and Herath and Herath studies the focus on technologically mediated decision-making focuses extensively on structural features of the organization's implementation and use of information communication technology (ICT) [11,12]. Whereby, the presumed solution to mental health issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic's remote working intensification of ICT, is to innovate in the development of smarter ICT. Such, an approach is also evident in Wang and Wu's [13] study entitled: Knowledge Management Based on Information Technology in response to COVID-19 crisis. For, it is proffered in this research that, "the use of innovative IT-enabled mechanisms (e.g., non-contact monitoring devices, intelligent robots, and telemedicine) can reduce the risk of exposure and leverage an artificial intelligence-based epidemic intelligence dashboard to support appropriate decision-making" (ibid. 1). However, the focus solely on macro-level decision-making analysis, neglects the impact of the micro-level dimensions of politics in determining the outcome of technologically mediated organizational decisions.

Conversely, Blanchard is concerned primarily with the migration from face-to-face (FtF) into computer mediated video conferencing. Blanchard focuses on how this dispersion impacts on the reciprocity of perspective of groups involved in decision-making processes. In psychology the conception of groups in terms of reciprocity of perception is defined as entitativity i.e., "an individual's cognitive assessment that a social unit is a group" (ibid. 292). Entitativity is assumed to be elementary to groups because individuals tend not to perform group processes or actualize group outcomes without achieving cognitive realization that the social entity is a group. Blanchard describes how the migration of their laboratory working into COVID-19 secure video conferencing precipitated a recognition of a changing dynamic in the entitativity of the group's decision-making. Examples, of the denaturing of the group's entitativity related to invisibility and a collective sense of "a lack of informal interactions"; and these persisted despite the introduction of supplements to video conferencing, such as modifications in the group's use of Google Drive and Google Docs so as to facilitate synchronous interaction. With specific regards to decision-making, Blanchard's micro-level analysis realizes politics in terms of individual attributes and hence focuses on the psychological phenomenon of "surface acting", which is facilitated by video

conferencing fatigue as a consequence of the cognitively mediated emotion labored in the effort to sustain a convincing level of entitativity. As Blanchard expresses it, "Surface acting occurs when people behave in ways they feel artificial, which causes cognitive dissonance and increases fatigue" (ibid. 293). The cognitively mediated emotion work precipitated by video conferencing involves the individual realizing that the computer mediated group decision-making process is not as real as F2F and thus participants perceive it necessary to "project" their "own realness (i.e., similarity) to the others, and to foster interactions that are stilted by the technology".

Blanchard's micro-level analysis therefore presupposes that video conferencing "surface acting" denatures the online decision-making event in terms of its intention to be outside of organizational political projections. In this respect the intrusion of political strategy can be ameliorated through an enhancement of remote presence; and such propositions are evident in micro-level analysis that has examined the technological augmentation of embodied communication. Matthews et al. [14] explore the emerging field of extended reality (XR)-based communication in their article entitled: Crisis and Extended Realities: Remote Presence in the Time of COVID-19. Similarly, to Blanchard the phenomenon of video conferencing "fatigue" features in XR-based communication research in terms of "the exhaustion attenuated modes of social presence can inspire". Examples of XR include Mixed Reality (MR), Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) with each variously defined in terms of enabling "immersion, presence, interactivity" in their respective enhanced computer mediated presence.

Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic XR-based communication represents a potential technological solution to the remote presence impact on organizational sociality; as Matthews expresses it: "XR has the potential to enhance a sense of presence-of really being there together-in a range of vital human domains" (ibid. 206). Limitations in respect to XR and video conferencing fatigue are also recognized, whereby Matthews cautions "of the damage this simulation might do, while embracing their capacity to include and embrace the diversity of human experience". Circumspection can be extended to the potentiality of XR-based communication to exacerbate existing inequities of political decision-making as inferred in the following statement: "Perhaps the most important learning the affordances of these emerging technologies provide is a timely reminder of the fragility of our environment, of the world order and the individuals who rely upon it". Such dystopian imaginary, although profound, falls short of critical reflection; for, its micro-analytical perspective neglects structural conditions limiting the accessibility of homeworking technology. Although digital infrastructures have facilitated remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the absence of structural interventions to enable equitable access, the crisis of public health exposes "a broad and wide digital division". Alternatively, the technological mediation of organizational politics precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic remote working conditions are more effectively theorized through the integration of macro and micro-level analysis; for, such multi-level theorizing enables an engagement with the

inter-personal and structural impact of technologically mediated inequality in decision-making processes.

### **“COVID-19 secure” remote working: Impact on equality and diversity in organizational decision-making**

Office of National Statistics (ONS) reports on the prevalence of homeworking in the immediate context of the UK's first lockdown, identify that in April 2020, 46.6% of people in employment were engaged in some form of homeworking (ONS). Within this cohort, it is estimated that 86.0% worked from home as a consequence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. ONS calculation on productivity identify homeworking as manifesting a one-third variation in time spent working, specifically: 34.4% “worked fewer hours than usual” and 30.3% “worked more hours than usual”. Insights into the legacy impact on organizational decision-making of COVID-19 secure remote working are evident in gender and socio-economic demographic differentials. For, it is estimated that “Women were slightly more likely to do some work at home than men, 47.5% and 45.7% respectively” and “Occupations requiring higher qualifications and more experience were more likely to provide homeworking opportunities than elementary and manual occupations”. The inference, presented here is that the selection process involved in determining “Who should go to work” has the potential to undermine equality and diversity gains in circumventing the negative intrusion of politics into the dynamics of organizational decision-making. Cognizant of this potential dilemma the government introduced relevant COVID-19 secure guidance.

According to the government's guidance, organizational decision-making on “Who should go to work” needs to involve consultation between employers and workers; with the proviso that: “this will need to be reflected in the COVID-19 workplace risk assessment and actions taken to manage the risks of transmission in line with this guidance” [7]. Factoring employees into the decision-making process can partially mitigate against discriminatory politics; indeed, the Working Safely During Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance states: “employers should be mindful of the particular needs of different groups of workers or individuals”. In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, the government guidance notifies employers that in their decision-making on “Who should go to work” an organization would be acting unlawfully “to discriminate, directly or indirectly, against anyone because of a protected characteristic such as age, sex or disability, race or ethnicity”. To the latter protected categories have been added: “particular responsibilities towards disabled workers and those who are new or expectant mothers”. Whereby employers are guided in their “Who should go to work” decision-making to avoid negative political intrusion by appreciating the distinct “circumstances of those with different protected characteristics”. It is presumed that equality and diversity can be ensured through “communicating appropriately with workers whose protected characteristics might either expose them to a different degree of risk” and or where employees might perceive the COVID-19 biosecurity interventions as “inappropriate or

challenging for them”. In conjunction with communication advice, the government's “Equality in the workplace” COVID-19 guidance encourages the employer to make “reasonable adjustments to avoid disabled workers being put at a disadvantage, assessing the health and safety risks for new or expectant mothers” and ensuring that these adjustments “do not have an unjustifiable negative impact on some groups compared to others, for example those with caring responsibilities or those with religious commitments” (7,15,16).

According to UK reports published, during 2020/21 the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting differentially on women compared with men. While more men perished from COVID-19, women's economic, employment and social well-being “was more negatively affected than men's during the first year of the pandemic” (ONS). It has been statistically calculated that during COVID-19 pandemic women in the UK spent “significantly less time working from home and more time on unpaid household work and childcare”. With specific regards to the latter: “During September and early October 2020, women spent 64% more time on unpaid household work than men”. As might have already been discerned the increase in unpaid care work mapped onto the COVID-19 guidance subject to closure directions for schools and differentials between males and females furloughed. For, example with regards to the former it has been statistically calculated that: “a significantly greater proportion of women (67%) than men (52%) homeschooled a school-age child in late January and early February (13 January and 7 February 2021)”. The impact on women's well-being as a result of bearing the responsibility for homeschooling is documented as thus: “In April and early May 2020, around one in three women (34%) reported that their well-being was negatively affected by homeschooling a school age child compared with only one in five men (20%). By late January and early February 2021, it was taking a greater toll on both women (53%) and men (45%)”. Consequently, it is unsurprising that: “At the beginning of the UK's first lockdown in March 2020, women spent 55% more time than men on unpaid childcare. However, this difference is smaller than in September and October 2020, when women spent 99% more time on unpaid childcare than men” [17].

Women are disproportionately represented in the customer-facing service provision, hospitality and office-based service sector jobs that were subject to closure direction during the UK's series of COVID-19 lockdowns. Consequently, women experienced a higher incidence of entry into the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme i.e., furlough. According to the ONS [17], “On 1 July 2020, there were 2.9 million on furlough, compared with 2.7 million men. By 31 October 2020, the number of women on furlough reduced to 1.2 million compared with 1.1 million men”. The attrition of women away from their organizational offices and into the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme continued unabated throughout 2020. Indeed, among the “total employments furloughed by gender, 1 July to 31 December 2020” it is evident that “since 1 July, more employments have been furloughed with female job holders than where the employee was male” [18]. Official statistical data confirms that as the UK entered into a second wave of Coronavirus virus epidemic levels of infection “for employments

where the employee was female there were 1.19 million employments furloughed at 31 October (year 2020; and compared with 1.14 million male employees)". Limits placed on service industry business and social gatherings in the autumn of 2020 further sustained the sectorial imbalance of COVID-19 secure closures, thus escalating the gender differential impact on females, whereby, "for employments where the employee was female there were 1.92 million employments furloughed at 30 November (year 2020; and compared with 1.79 million male employees)" and "figures show that this number decreased throughout December to 1.88 million at 31 December (year 2020; and compared with 1.85 million male employees)".

In March 2021, one year after the Coronavirus Act 2020 achieved Royal Assent, an equality impact assessment was published as part of regular continuous reviews and parliamentary scrutiny [18,19]. The UK Government is at pains to express appreciation of the profound "impact many of the provisions of the Act have on people's lives" (ibid. 17). Organizational and business equality human rights impacts are also factored into this cognizance. For, as the Government details: "On 28 July, an Impact Assessment of the provisions of the Act was published, recording the equality analysis undertaken to enable Ministers to fulfil the requirements placed on them by the public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010". It is acknowledged by the Government that the latter review identified that aspects of the Act's provision have had disproportionate impact. But these equality and human rights differential outcomes were considered to be outweighed by the betterment precipitative of the Government's strategy [19]. Specifically, the Government concedes: "it was found that, in some cases, the provisions could give rise to more significant impacts on certain protected groups. However, these impacts were considered to be justified and a proportionate means of achieving the legitimate aim of protecting the general public from Coronavirus by increasing the capacity of public service systems and mitigating the spread of infection" (ibid. 17-18).

The UK government's willingness to concede to a degree of equality and human rights differential impacts as collateral damage, when set against a highly effective vaccine rollout, is a disconcerting ethical dilemma. Conversely, it is proposed that positive discrimination direct intervention is necessary so as to guarantee that government strives beyond merely securing base-line equality and human rights [10,12,20,21-23]. One such example is espoused by Viswanath and Mullins [24] in their article entitled: Gender Responsive Budgeting and the COVID-19 Pandemic Response: a Feminist Standpoint. The authors provide a feminist standpoint review of the differential impact on females of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Whereby, the disproportionately female sectorial composition of the labour markets worse affected by the COVID-19 pandemic e.g., hospitality, retail and services in conjunction with these being the lowest paid jobs has resulted in substantial gender differences in the pandemic's economic downturn. Viswanath and Mullins [24] propose that these gender differentials provide sufficient evidence to support the formal inclusion of "gender responsive budgeting" into COVID-19 policy decision-making processes. Specifically, the

authors state "The policy tool of gender responsive budgeting, successfully implemented in various countries, is proposed to offset the gender inequities triggered by the pandemic in the U.S." (ibid.1). The feminist economic tool of "gender inclusive policy-making" exceeds beyond a first wave feminist notion of visibly increasing the inclusion of under-represented groups in decision-making, while retaining existing institutional structures and processes. Conversely, Viswanath and Mullins [24] recognize that gender inequalities are reproduced in the politics of decision-making; and thus efficacious "gender inclusive policy-making" necessitates examining "public problems through a gender lens" (ibid. 11). One concurs with this proposition, especially when it is recognized that females are disproportionately responsible for care activities and the COVID-19 crisis of public health, differentially impacted on informal care providers. Thus, it is reasonable to insist that governments exceed beyond securing base-line equality and human rights in their policy decision-making; and instead, directly intervene in addressing gender disadvantage precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic [25]. Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) is a positive intervention; and there needs to be wider solidarity with the following proposition: "Mainstreaming GRB into pandemic response would pressure governments to 'put their money where their mouth is' and pave the way to restore women's labor force participation rates".

### **"COVID-19 secure" compliance: Legacy impact on organizational politics of decision-making conflict**

Despite convincing disputations, academic discourse on organizational decision-making is substantively preoccupied with conceptualizing this phenomenon as Darr and Johns [22] express it: "as an individual-level construct". Consequently, structural influences such as regulatory routinization are deprioritized in favor of the micro-level analysis of "individual attributes such as Machiavellian or self-monitoring in relation to perceived politics" (ibid. 170). Considered from a "single-level vacuum" the COVID-19 secure work conditions legalized by the Coronavirus Act 2020, should irrevocably disrupt the politics of self-monitoring and Machiavellian machinations of the individual-level agents that constitute the main focus of micro-level analysis [26,27]. Thus, from this micro-level perspective a legacy impact of the COVID-19 secure workplace, is a limiting off, in-person opportunities for the Machiavellian pursuit of self-interest. In this respect, disparities in the employee profile of COVID-19 secure working compliance can be reduced, in micro-level analysis, to an analysis of the biographic profile and personality attributes of individual organizational actors. Such appears to be the basis of the Office of National Statistics [28] report entitled: Coronavirus and Compliance with Government Guidance, UK: April 2021 [14,29]. Carried out by the independent market research agency IFF, the report is based on the findings of a mixed-methods qualitative study involving, 180 in-depth qualitative interviews with UK adults (18 years and over), conducted between 23 December 2020 and 22 January 2021; and these interviews were concurrent with the administration of diaries into which 90 of the participants entered information.

Particularly, interesting are the study's findings pertaining to COVID-19 secure compliance among low-income workers versus that of high-income [9]. With regards to the former, it is reported that: "For many low-income workers, employers played a critical role in their opportunities to comply". Whereby in customers facing and in-person work activities government COVID-19 secure guidance, set into law by the Coronavirus Act 2020, and directly translated by employers, provided for an unavoidable situational compliance as a necessitate of fulfilling the employment role. Non-compliance with the COVID-19 secure guidance among this cohort of workers is defined by the study as a micro-level feature of situational decision-making. For example, rational decision-making is presumed in the micro-level analysis approach when low-income workers reported that their compliance with guidelines was predicated on their employers providing the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) necessary to facilitate COVID-19 secure in-person work. Conversely, irrational politicized decision-making is discerned to occur when low-income workers exhibited non-compliance in avoiding the COVID-19 secure surveillance technology of Test and Trace, as is evident in the following research finding: "A few reported that they were under income pressure and that they or their colleagues would not necessarily self-isolate, be tested or participate in Test and Trace because they could not afford to be off work without pay". The inference here is that the study's inclusion of "a few" as an operative places emphasis on the decision-making to be a situational tactic peculiarly adopted by a limited number of organizational actors as opposed to a universal decision-making response to e.g., economic and politicised structural inadequacies in SSP [30,31]. It is apparent here and elsewhere that the study's limited micro-analysis of COVID-19 guidance decision-making, marginalizes a focus on macro-structural features such as PPE supply-chain resourcing. Indeed, the limitations of micro-level framing are compounded in the study's analysis of compliance among high-income workers.

Significantly the COVID-19 secure conditions of working accelerated latent anachronisms in office-based organizational delivery within the international space and instantaneous time of the post-industrial informational knowledge economy [17,28,32,33]. Accordingly, the study reports: "Many high-income workers were working from home". Correspondingly, it is reported that the prevalence of homeworking for high-income workers correlated with a high-level of reported COVID-19 secure compliance practice by this cohort. Significantly, compliance and noncompliance among this high-income cohort, are micro-analyzed by the study as outcomes of an individual's situational decision-making; as is inferred in the following reported finding: "Many high-income workers had good opportunities to follow the guidance [8,34]. There were, however, some high-income workers who broke social mixing and social distancing guidance to meet family and friends. Many of these participants justified this on the ground that either they or a member of their family required support with childcare. Or to maintain their mental well-being". As can be discerned, the micro-level analysis marginalizes and or ameliorates structural factors through the assumption that high-income workers have "high levels of understanding of the guidance informed by

mainstream sources of information, with good awareness of the underlying rationale" and this in conjunction with the existence of homeworking space resources provides for the conditions of compliance [11,13,15,16,24,35,36]. And in so doing, the study compounds the limitations of micro-analysis of organizational politics and decision-making; for it neglects to interpret non-compliance in low-income and high-income groups as a manifestation of conflict in the organizational politics of COVID-19 secure compliance.

## CONCLUSION

Conversely, an appreciation of decision-making frameworks that combine micro and macro analysis introduces into the conceptualisation of COVID-19 guidance compliance what is described elsewhere and in previous times by Darr and Johns as recognition: "of the impact of the group conflict processes on political activity or perceptions". While non-compliance might be interpreted as dissension, without also exploring the structural determinants of conflict processes non-compliance is merely reduced to the personality attributes and or the situational politicized decision-making of the individual. Alternatively, a focus on agency and structure in the conflict processes that come into being in decision-making, facilitates an awareness of COVID-19 secure guidance in terms of the management of an organizational politics of compliance. In so doing, providing scope for the analysis of incidents of noncompliance, as manifestations of the impact of conflict in the structured inequalities of the politics of organizational decision-making. This case study has focused on conflictual features of rational choice theory and technological determinism in respect to the Coronavirus Act 2020's COVID-19 secure guidance and with regards to ensuring equality and diversity in its organizational decision-making processes.

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