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Business continuity, bureaucratic resilience and the limitations of neoliberal survival logics in international organisations

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Abstract

This article contends that investigating relationalities between business continuity management (BCM), staff behaviours, and bureaucratic resilience advances understandings of the survival of international organisations (IOs). Drawing on in-depth interviews, a global staff survey, and a discourse analysis of United Nations (UN) reports and applying a post-colonial feminist theoretical approach foregrounding care ethics to the study of IOs, the article examines how the UN Secretary-General's Alternative Working Arrangements directive to close physical offices and open 'virtual offices' was implemented in the first 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is contended that BCM is necessary for IO survival, since if the IO bureaucracy is unable to be productive and maintain its spheres of influence during a crisis, it risks losing power and authority. Between March 2020 and August 2021, staff facilitated IO survival organically, from the bottom up, in four ways: demonstrating good performance and productivity; being adaptable and resilient; maintaining personal spheres of influence; and building communities of care within the UN. However, the UN's neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity and bureaucratic resilience-building neglected staff care needs. Consequently, IO survival is predicated on staff performing as exploited gendered and racialised 'neoliberal subjects', revealing a chronic structural crisis rooted in the UN bureaucracy's hierarchical composition and unequal employment regime.

Keywords: business continuity; ethics of care; gender; international bureaucracy; neoliberalism; race

Introduction

Scholars have shown that international organisations (IOs) rarely die, but they are nonetheless concerned with their survival.[1] Challenging rationalist assumptions that IOs endure as legal entities that cannot be easily replaced, recent threats to the liberal international order have exposed the fragility of IOs, leading to renewed interest in understanding how IOs respond to political contestation, financial uncertainty, fears of legitimacy depletion, and state withdrawal.[2] This has led to

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[1]Ernst B. Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State: Functionalism and International Organization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964); Julia Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organisations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62 (2018), pp. 1–13; Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 'What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations terminate', *European Journal of International Relations*, 27:1 (2021), pp. 281–310; Hylke Dijkstra and Maria J. Debre, 'The Death of Major International Organizations: When Institutional Stickiness is not Enough', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:4 (October, 2022), pp. 1–13.

[2]Dijkstra and Debre, 'The death of major organisations'; Gisela Hirschmann, 'International organizations' responses to member state contestation: From inertia to resilience', *International Affairs*, 97:6 (2021), pp. 1963–81; Maria Larionova and John Kirton, 'Global governance after the COVID-19 crisis', *International Organisations Research Journal*, 15:2 (2020), pp. 7–17.

investigations into complex internal dynamics within international bureaucracies to understand how IOs, as autonomous actors, strengthen their authority, self-legitimate, and resilience-build.[3] Business continuity constitutes the processes and practices organisations use to maintain essential operations during and after major incidents. Until now, the relationship between BCM, staff behaviours, and organisational resilience has been overlooked in the literature on IO survival. Yet investigating bureaucratic-wide approaches to business continuity and institutional resilience-building is important if we are to understand how IOs seek to survive politically during times of instability and persist in times of relative stability.

There are three main reasons why business continuity has been neglected in the literature on IO survival. First, IOs have been slow to improve business continuity practices in comparison to private sector and not-for-profit industries, only developing strategies from the late 2000s onwards.[4] Second, IOs enjoyed a relatively stable post-Cold War global operating environment up until 2020. Having mainly dealt with crises taking place within specific regions of the world, contemporary IOs had not yet managed a global existential crisis, such as the recent health pandemic. Unlike localised crises, global crises threaten survival by preventing an IO from engaging in business-as-usual activities in all regions of the world simultaneously and place the IO's global workforce at risk. Third, like other corporate practices underpinning the everyday functioning of IO bureaucracies, BCM has been regarded as a banal, depoliticised, and technocratic practice, undeserving of investigation. Scholars researching IOs have primarily focused on understanding power-based framings of IO survival and nested agent/principal relations.[5] How staff engage in BCM to support IO survival from the bottom up is yet to be investigated. Overall, less attention has been paid to examining relationalities between United Nations (UN) system-wide organisational management practices; the role individual staff play in facilitating IO survival during crises; and the impact these processes have on staff themselves.

Applying a post-colonial feminist theoretical approach and feminist care ethics to the study of IOs and drawing on original empirical field research, including in-depth interviews, a global staff survey, and a discourse analysis of UN Joint Inspection Unit reports, this article contributes to the growing literature on IO survival by introducing business continuity as a conceptual tool to help explain how IOs build bureaucratic resilience and survive. The article asks three interrelated questions. First, how do UN system-wide policy reports and recommendations on business continuity conceptualise 'crisis', 'crisis-response', and 'resilience'? Second, how do IO staff facilitate business continuity at the micro-level during a crisis situation? And third, what impact do these processes have on staff well-being? By undertaking a multi-scalar analysis to investigate these three lines of enquiry, we develop a comprehensive understanding of IO survival practices and the complex power dynamics at play in IO bureaucracies. To explore these processes, we investigate how the UN ensured business continuity during the first 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 to September 2021). Specifically, we examine how the UN Secretary-General's Alternative Working Arrangements Directive, which called for the closure of physical offices, the opening of 'virtual offices', and a bureaucracy-wide adoption of remote working, was implemented by staff and teams across the UN system. The UN system comprises the main bodies of the UN itself (e.g. the Secretariat and General Assembly) and funds, programmes, and independent specialised agencies

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[3]Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations: An introduction', *Review of International Organizations*, 14 (2019), pp. 581–606; Sarah von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror on the wall": Self-legitimation by international organizations', *International Organisations Quarterly*, 63 (2020), pp. 207–19; Ben Christian, 'A threat rather than a resource: Why voicing internal criticism is difficult in international organisations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25 (2020), pp. 425–49.

[4]Christel Amadou, 'Business continuity management in international organisations', *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, 7:3 (2013), pp. 221–9.

[5]Jean Tirole, 'Hierarchies and bureaucracies: On the role of collusion in organizations', *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization*, 2:2 (1986), pp. 181–214.

such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Bank that have their own leadership, budget, and work areas.[6]

We contend that business continuity is a necessary component of IO survival. If the global workforce is unable to deliver business-critical work programmes during a crisis, network externally, and maintain internal coherence (or stickiness), the IO's influence is in danger of shrinking and the IO bureaucracy risks losing power and authority. Staff support business continuity and IO survival in four ways: (1) demonstrating good performance and productivity; (2) being adaptable and resilient; (3) maintaining personal spheres of influence; (4) building communities of care within the IO. However, central UN system policy recommendations promote a neoliberal technocratic approach to business continuity and resilience-building that neglects staff relationality, dependency, and care needs. Despite the care deficit in existing business continuity planning and policies, there is a high expectation that in crisis situations, staff should perform as the ideal neoliberal subject: entrepreneurial, adaptive, and responsible for maintaining their own resilience and care needs. In doing so, employee productivity and resilience build bureaucratic resilience, forged from the bottom up and generated organically. Yet our findings also reveal that staff willingness to perform as neoliberal subjects constitutes a form of anxious labour driven by a need to secure their own employee survival in a competitive employment regime. This anxious labour intensifies for staff employed on fixed-term contracts; for staff working in isolated field duty stations in conflict-affected regions; and for minoritised staff groups, often originating from UN member states in the Global South. Therefore, in addition to pushing the care deficit onto individual staff and teams, IO survival is predicated on the exploitation of staff, which reveals a chronic structural crisis born out of the UN bureaucracy's raced and gendered hierarchical composition and complex employment regime. The article proceeds as follows. We first conceptualise business continuity, resilience, and IO survival before critically analysing Joint Inspection Unit policy documents. We then examine how staff adapted to working remotely during the Covid crisis and analyse staff strategies to facilitate employee survival and IO survival. We conclude by reflecting on how the UN's neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity and staff behaviours during crisis erode flatter, collaborative institutional ways of working and strengthen the international bureaucracy's older, Euro-American-centric hierarchical structure.

Business continuity, resilience, and IO survival

Business continuity refers to the strategies and work practices organisations implement to quickly restore business-critical functions after disruptive events, such as cyberattacks, natural disasters, or other emergencies.[7] In Western corporations, business continuity is a technocratic practice informed by neoliberal rationalities emphasising the organisation's imperative to protect its efficiency, profitability, and competitive advantage.[8] The practice evolved out of earlier disaster recovery approaches developed by Global North corporations and has undergone several transitions since the 1970s. However, the 1990s saw the entrenchment of neoliberal approaches when corporations adopted 'value-based' perspectives foregrounding staff in facilitating business continuity.[9] Integrating 'social and technical systems', leaderships aimed to protect organisations and safeguard human resources, while reassuring stakeholders and investors they could function without disruption.[10] BCM is related to crisis management and business resilience. Typically led by the corporate communications function, crisis management ensures staff and external stakeholders are kept informed and reassured during crises. Business resilience concerns identifying

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[6]United Nations, available at: {https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-system}.

[7]Leni Sagita Riantini Supriadi and Low Sui Pheng, *Business Continuity Management in Construction* (New York: Springer, 2018), pp. 41–73 (p. 41).

[8]Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 7.

[9]Brahim Herbane, Dominic Elliott, and Ethne M. Swartz, 'Business continuity management: Time for a strategic role?', *Long Range Planning*, 37 (2004), pp. 435–57.

[10]Supriadi and Pheng, 'Business continuity management (BCM)', p. 41.

vulnerabilities[11] that weaken an organisation's long-term survivability[12] and is measured by the ability of the organisation to 'bounce back' after disruption.[13] Business resilience is determined by the organisation's 'change readiness', including its capacity to be agile and flexible to maintain competitive advantage.[14] Overall, effective BCM improves business resilience and facilitates organisational survival.[15]

Since their inception, international organisations have been preoccupied with survival. Barnett and Coleman argued in 2005 that while 'IOs have a relatively low mortality rate', there exist 'moments when their survival is at stake' and 'periods when they worry about their relevance and whether they have the resources to carry out their goals'. They observed that IOs require material and symbolic resources to survive, defining material resources as technologies and finance and symbolic resources as legitimacy.[16] Recent efforts to understand why some IOs die and others thrive have led a new generation of scholars to further problematise rationalist and functionalist assumptions that IO endurance is determined by design, agent/principal relations, and demand/supply needs alone. Without losing sight of the challenges of researching IOs as autonomous actors, corporate entities, and forums for cooperation between member states,[17] scholars adopting sociological approaches examine how IO bureaucracies create internal 'logics of longevity'.[18]

Until now, BCM has been neglected in literature on IO survival, despite its critical role within international bureaucracies. The few studies available focus on crisis management and disaster recovery practices within one or two UN specialised agencies and peacekeeping.[19] Studies on IO resilience are nascent. Pre-2020 scholarship investigated how resilience was conceptualised and operationalised in externally facing programmes of work.[20] Lack of interest in BCM is partly due to the assumption that corporate functions are depoliticised technocratic practices offering limited insights into IO behaviour and agent/principal relations. Yet as Badache shows, corporate functions are indeed politicised practices deserving analysis.[21]

The term IO survival has not been conceptualised in the literature and is often used interchangeably with related but distinct organisational phenomena such as persistence,[22] endurance, stability, longevity,[23] resilience,[24] vitality,[25] and robustness.[26] Bureaucratic resilience also remains loosely

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[11]In the scholarly literature on IOs, vulnerabilities and bureaucratic dysfunction are understood as internal pathologies.

[12]Supriadi and Pheng, 'Business continuity management (BCM)', p. 49.

[13]David Parsons, 'Organisational resilience', *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 25:2 (2010), pp. 18–20.

[14]Herbane et al., 'Business continuity management', p. 437.

[15]Herbane et al., 'Business continuity management', p. 441.

[16]Michael Barnett and Liv Coleman, 'Designing police: Interpol and the study of change in international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:4 (2005), pp. 593–619 (p. 597).

[17]Dominik Zaum (ed.), *Legitimating International Organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 13.

[18]Tallberg and Zürn 'The legitimacy and legitimation'; von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror on the wall"'; Christian, 'A threat rather than a resource'; Jörn Ege, Michael W. Bauer, and Norn Wagner, 'How do international bureaucrats affect policy outputs? Studying administrative influence strategies in international organizations', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 87:4 (2020), pp. 737–54.

[19]Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Anja T. Kaspersen and Ole Jacob Sending, 'The United Nations and Civilian Crisis Management', Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (2005).

[20]Evgeny Treshchenkov, 'Resilience in discourses of the European Union and international organisations', *International Organizations Research Journal*, 14:1 (2019), pp. 55–75; Beth Goldblatt and Shirin M. Rai, 'Remedying depletion through social reproduction: A critical engagement with the United Nations's business and human rights framework', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 3:2 (2020), pp. 185–202.

[21]Fanny Badache, 'A representative bureaucracy perspective on workforce composition in international organizations: The case of the United Nations Secretariat', *Public Administration*, 98:2 (2020), pp. 392–407.

[22]Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie?', p. 1.

[23]Dijkstra and Debre, 'The death of major organisations', p. 2.

[24]Gisella Hirschmann, 'International organizations' responses to member state contestation: From inertia to resilience', *International Affairs*, 97:6 (2021), pp. 1963–81.

[25]Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie?'.

[26]Dijkstra and Debre, 'The death of major organisations', p. 2.

defined. For Hirschmann, resilience-building constitutes 'developing organizational capacities to limit contestation by member states'.[27] Kimber argues that the term resilience gained importance within the UN in the 1990s when it replaced 'vulnerability' in humanitarian and natural disaster contexts but as a concept has been kept intentionally ambiguous to retain its adaptability.[28] Scholars vacillate between conceptualising survival as political survival – secured by accruing legitimacy from member states – and bureaucratic survival, which enables an IO to accrue autonomy and power. Yet distinguishing between political survival and bureaucratic survival is important if we are to understand contradictions in IO behaviour. As Gray suggests, IOs can continue to have legitimacy in the eyes of member states while being unproductive and lacking agentive power or will.[29]

Scholars adopting sociological perspectives draw attention to one of three kinds of organisational survival logic within international bureaucracies: logics of competition; logics of cohesion; and logics of adaptation. Influenced by Haas, scholars foregrounding logics of competition regard IOs as competing with one another within the international system and show how the personal influence of international civil servants and technical staff/experts results in niche-building, competitive advantage, and IO expansionism.[30] Sending contends that micro- and meso-level competitions between experts within a given hierarchically organised social space, or community of practice, determines why some IOs are authoritative and others marginal. Interpersonal competitions and inter-epistemic conflicts enable IOs to acquire authority, set agendas, implement policies, enforce rules, and regulate states.[31] Investigating internal logics of competition, Patz and Goetz show how organisational survival manifests at the micro-level when teams, departments, and agencies fiefdom-build by securing larger budgets. Internal competitions produce competing change processes as well as dysfunction yet can result in IO expansion.[32] Gray suggests that, driven by a fear of becoming marginal or 'zombie IOs', international bureaucracies compete to attract exceptional talent and grow their expertise. This suggests staff are in high demand in a candidate-driven global job market.

Scholars foregrounding logics of cohesion focus on how institutional norms, rules, and practices generate 'institutional glue', stickiness and stability within international bureaucracies. Focusing on IO self-legitimisation practices, von Billerbeck suggests staff buy into IO values and brand after attending formal internal ceremonies and corporate events.[33] Christian observes how staff engage in self-protection strategies by suppressing opinions about IO pathologies and dysfunction to protect their career prospects, which facilitates IO internal cohesion and stability.[34] Scholars adopting logics of adaptation foreground organisational change and examine how IOs adapt to be more cost-effective, responsive, and relevant to external stakeholders.[35] Early studies emphasised the representative nature of IO bureaucracies and ways to secure external legitimacy while responding

[27]Hirschmann, 'International organizations' responses to member state contestation', p. 1964.

[28]Leah Kimber, 'Resilience from the United Nations standpoint: The challenges of "vagueness"', in Siri Wiig and Babette Fahlbruch (eds), *Exploring Resilience* (New York: Springer, 2019), pp. 89–96.

[29]Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie?' p. 1.

[30]Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, *The Politics of Expertise in International Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2017); Christina Boswell, 'The role of expert knowledge in international organizations', in Annabelle Littoz-Monnet (ed), *The Politics of Expertise in International Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 19–36.

[31]Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[32]Ronnie Patz and Klaus H. Goetz, *Managing Money and Discord in the UN: Budgeting and Bureaucracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 12.

[33]Von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror on the wall"'.

[34]Christian, 'A threat rather than a resource', p. 438.

[35]Laurance Geri, 'New public management and the reform of international organizations', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 67 (2001), pp. 445–60; Ranjit Lall, 'Beyond institutional design: Explaining the performance of international organizations', *International Organization*, 71 (2017), pp. 245–80; Dijkstra and Debre, 'The death of major organisations'.

to member-state expectations.[36] Recently, scholars have examined how IO bureaucracies accrue power and agency. For Hirschmann, IOs respond to existential threats in one of three ways: inertia (where 'not responding' becomes a strategic decision), adaptation, and resilience-building, though she examines internal dynamics only in relation to their impact on principal/agent relations.[37] Within existing scholarship, the framing of bureaucratic survival most closely aligns to anglophone concepts of organisational survival found in Western-produced strategic management literature. Foregrounding neoliberal rationalities, strategic management scholars define organisations as being governed by free markets and free trade, and vulnerable to termination *in perpetuum*. Survival constitutes an organisation's 'long term survival relative to dissolution' in 'volatile and competitive environments'.[38] An organisation's age, size, financial health, and specialisation are determining factors,[39] which correlate with IO scholars' assertion that the 'stickiness' or durability of IOs may be due to their size, 'high replacement costs, institutional assets', and the ability of secretariats to 'take on new tasks'.[40]

Strategic management scholars acknowledge the importance of staff's productive power in business continuity, resilience-building, and organisational survival. Business continuity procedures and policies may reinforce accepted standards of behaviour or demand that staff follow new rules, norms, and practices to ensure the organisation adapts quickly after exogenous and endogenous shocks. According to Herbane et al., 'essential to the success of BCM' is 'recognition that an effective response will be determined by employees' behaviour during the business recovery process'.[41] This points to the requirement to analyse multilayered ways in which business continuity and resilience-building play out in IO bureaucracies and examine whether staff strengthen or weaken bureaucratic resilience and IO survival.

Critical strategic management scholars critique how neoliberal rationalities inform the behaviour of corporate institutions. In contrast, scholars investigating IO internal cohesion and survival have not examined how neoliberal rationalities shape IO workplace cultures, staff behaviours and experiences, and agent/principal relations. Nor have they examined possible entanglements between neoliberal rationalities and historically situated colonial/neocolonial hierarchical patterns of domination and subordination. While BCM, like institutional resilience-building, should not be reduced to neoliberal governance and policy, as a technocratic work practice it can entrench neoliberal forms of governance.[42] Therefore, one should consider how work practices informed by neoliberal rationalities in corporate institutions become implemented within IO bureaucracies and whether they become politicised[43] or adapted to accommodate nested agent/principal relations. This is particularly important given that neoliberal approaches used by IOs in external programmes of work have been shown to 'intensify peripheralisation of the global south along economic, political, social and cultural lines'[44] and to erode the liberal values of equality and justice on which many IOs were founded. As Chowdry and Nair contend, failure to investigate neoliberal paradigms risks 'dissimulation around questions concerning equity, poverty and powerlessness', while naturalising 'the racialised, gendered and class [or caste] processes that underwrite global hierarchies'.[45] Without this critique, scholars reproduce the 'eurocentric self' of the imagined

[36] Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The legitimacy of global governance institutions', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 20:4 (2006), pp. 405–37 (p. 423).

[37] Hirschmann, 'International organizations' responses', p. 1965.

[38] Matthew Josefy, Joseph Harrison, David Sirmon, and Christina Carnes, 'Living and dying: Synthesizing the literature on firm survival and failure across stages of development', *Academy of Management Annals*, 11:2 (2017), pp. 770–99 (p. 777).

[39] Herbane et al., 'Business continuity management', p. 436.

[40] Dijkstra and Debre, 'The death of major organisations', p. 2.

[41] Herbane et al., 'Business continuity management', p. 434.

[42] Jonathan Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: A governmentality approach', *Resilience*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 38–52.

[43] See Mareike Louis and Lucile Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[44] Geeta Chowdry and Sheila Nair (eds), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

[45] Chowdry and Nair, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations*, p. 1.

IO bureaucrat,[46] leading to simplified understandings of staff engagement in IO survival processes. To avoid presenting minoritised staff (for example, lower-ranking staff from the Global South) as lacking agency and productive power, it is equally important to consider how IO bureaucracies transition following decolonialising efforts.

There is also limited understanding of how business continuity practices during crises impacts on staff well-being (vitality). In this article, well-being constitutes a person's perception of their life as a whole, including mental, physical, emotional, social, spiritual, environmental, and economic conditions.[47] Gender scholars Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Lynne Segal contend we are all vulnerable, may at any point suffer and are dependent on one other (and the world). Care provision – that is, being supported and nurtured and caring for others – is central to human life and survival.[48] Lack of attention to staff well-being may be attributed to the depiction of employees as (white, Western) neoliberal subjects. Assumed to be solely governed by market forces and metrics, neoliberal subjects are narrowly defined as self-reliant and self-governing, efficient, entrepreneurial actors responsible for their own care and well-being.[49] In this neoliberal imaginary, care is devalued, invisibilised, and managed in the feminised private sphere (a 'domain governed by needs and affective ties'). Care is not of concern for the institution and workplace – the public sphere wherein rights and individuality are exercised and expressed.[50] Only recently have scholars begun to consider the impact IO crisis response has on staff themselves. Gordon and Jones are critical of how IO bureaucracies ignore their own value systems and institutional commitments to provide staff with a duty of care during existential crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.[51] However, focusing only on staff with caring responsibilities in their personal lives, the study did not examine broader relations of care and dependency within IOs, nor consider how agentive staff exercise resilience and prevent depletion of well-being during times of heightened vulnerability. We contend that studying business continuity practices advances understandings of how IO bureaucracies survive. This includes understanding how IOs imagine, narrativise, and prioritise crises; how IOs choose to respond to crises; and how IOs apply neoliberal organisational management approaches to build competitive advantage. Yet, by focusing on the lived experiences of staff, we gain a deeper understanding of IO resilience-building mechanisms and how staff support IO survival.

Methodology

To explore staff engagement in business continuity, bureaucratic resilience-building, and IO survival from the bottom up, we combine a post-colonial theoretical approach with feminist care ethics. Post-colonial readings of IOs denaturalise Western imaginaries of the international system depicting the Global North as a stable core and the Global South as its unstable periphery and offer alternative perspectives by defamiliarising the everyday in organisational phenomena.[52] Post-colonial theorising also provides a conceptual framework which centres people's agency and productive power while critically analysing structural violence within IO bureaucracies in relation to global raced and gendered power hierarchies. This involves studying 'the subaltern within IOs'[53] to foreground subordinated and marginalised (invisible) people and their workplace practices.

[46]Chowdhry and Nair, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations*, p. 5.

[47]Tuula Helne, 'Being matters: A holistic conception of wellbeing in the shift towards strongly sustainable societies', in Karl Johan Bonnedahl and Pasi Heikkurinen (eds), *Strongly Sustainable Societies* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 229–46.

[48]Lynne Segal, *Lean on Me: A Politics of Radical Care* (London: Verso, 2023), pp. 4–5.

[49]Wendy Brown in Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, pp. 48–50.

[50]Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, p. 49.

[51]Eleanor Gordon and Briony Jones, 'Caring for carers in international organisations: Ensuring inclusive, responsive and effective peacebuilding', DCAF policy brief (2022).

[52]Anshuman Prasad, 'The gaze of the other: Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis', in Anshuman Prasad (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement* (Palgrave McMillan, 2003), pp. 3–43.

[53]Georgina Holmes, Katharine A. M. Wright, Soumita Basu, et al., 'Feminist experiences of "studying up": Encounters with international institutions', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 47:2 (2019), pp. 210–30 (p. 212).

Feminists contend that institutional hierarchies and labour are gendered, racialised, and shaped by discriminatory practices.[54] Feminist ethics of care is based on a relational ontology that rejects abstract, Western liberal moral reasoning depicting humans as autonomous and disconnected from each other. All humans are vulnerable and dependent on one other for their care needs and well-being[55] and have varied lifeways and experiences within and outside IOs.[56] Together, a post-colonial and feminist ethics of care approach offers a way of critiquing how neoliberal practices are instituted in IO bureaucracies and how staff enact or resist neoliberalism in the workplace,[57] while centring the humanness of staff and the geographies of care relations[58] in which staff are embedded. We conceptualise the UN system as an international bureaucracy with a hierarchical structure and networked composition, governed by formal and informal institutional rules, norms, and practices – some centralised and system-wide and others agency- and/or team-specific.[59] Staff engage in relations of dependency, responsibility, and care within the UN system and are agentive actors. Workplace practices typically do not occur in isolation but emerge out of relations between staff – relations that may be positive and productive or may 'construct and enact power and knowledge in ways that are damaging and exclusionary'.[60]

The case study is developed from empirical fieldwork and a discourse analysis of 11 Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) reports containing recommendations on BCM published between 2010 and 2021. The JIU provides independent oversight to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and coordination within the UN system. We then examined staff experiences of implementing one business continuity practice: the requirement to work remotely in UN system 'virtual offices' during the first 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 to September 2021), as per the Secretary-General's Alternative Working Arrangements Directive of March 2020. We read and coded JIU reports to identify patterns and themes and the language used, paying attention to how crisis, crisis-response, and resilience were conceptualised and whether care ethics were present or absent. We then conducted 28 synchronous online semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams and Zoom between 1 May 2021 and 31 October 2021 with 8 men and 20 women employed within 19 organisations across the UN system. To draw out experiences, we focus on two workplace practices related to staff employee survival: being visible and networking. Using discourse analysis, we coded and analysed research participants' language, their explanations for engaging in these workplace practices, and the strategies staff developed to continue working with colleagues and external partners during the crisis situation. We then circulated an online staff survey to gather more data on staff experiences of working remotely in the first 18 months of the Covid crisis.

Participants volunteered after receiving an email circular from UN Women's Gender Focal Point network, the UN Youth Network mailing list, and the UN Field Staff Union mailing list in May 2021. Between August and October 2022, 74 staff completed the online survey. In total, 102 staff (53 nationalities) located in 32 duty stations across the UN system participated. Of the respondents, 61 per cent worked in Global North duty stations and 39 per cent in field duty stations, including in conflict-affected states ('deep-field' duty stations). Staff groups included technocrats/experts, civil servants, professional services staff (in communications, human resources,

[54] Georgina Holmes, 'Feminist institutionalism', in Kseniya Oksamytna and John Karlsrud (eds), *United Nations Peace Operations and International Relations Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 175–94.

[55] Marian Barnes, Tula Brannelly, Lizzie Ward, and Nicki Ward, 'Introduction: The critical significance of care', in Marian Barnes, Tula Brannelly, Lizzie Ward, and Nicki Ward (eds), *Ethics of Care: Critical Advances in International Perspective* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 3–19.

[56] Prasad, 'The gaze of the other', p. 19.

[57] Pete Thomas, Louise McAdrle, and Richard Saundry, 'The enactment of neoliberalism in the workplace: The degradation of the employment relationship', *Competition & Change*, 24:2 (2020), pp. 105–13.

[58] Parvati Raghuram, Clare Madge, and Pat Noxolo, 'Rethinking responsibility and care for a postcolonial world', *Geoforum*, 40 (2009), pp. 5–13.

[59] Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*.

[60] Nicki Ward, 'Care ethics, intersectionality and poststructuralism', in Marian Barnes, Tula Brannelly, Lizzie Ward, and Nicki Ward (eds), *Ethics of Care: Critical Advances in International Perspective* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 57–68.

finance, and information technology) and practitioners. Representation from all UN regions of the world was obtained. Participants were aged between 35 and 65. Job grades ranged from professional levels P1 to P5 to higher grade director levels D1, D2, and D3. The first part of the interview script contained closed questions that were identical to survey questions. This allowed us to code quantitative data from interviews with survey data in Qualtrics. All qualitative data was transcribed and anonymised. Research participants consented to partaking in the project, and interviews were conducted in English, which meant we were unable to source research participants' perspectives in their native languages. This limited our access to indigenous schemas and worldviews. Since none of the volunteer research participants openly self-identified as LGBTQ+ or as having disabilities, the experiences and perspectives of these staff groups are excluded from our analysis. With this methodological approach, we develop a multi-scalar analysis to understand how business continuity was facilitated by staff and how staff were affected.

Case study: Business continuity in the UN system during the Covid crisis

Although on the agendas of corporate industry and not-for-profit organisations for 40 years, BCM only grew in significance in the UN after the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, when the Secretary-General observed in his 'annual report to the General Assembly' that business continuity supported 'delivery of UN mandates' and ensured 'the safety, security and health of its staff'.[61] In 2011, the JIU conducted its first system-wide review of BCM, requested by UNICEF following several regional crises. The report concluded that the UN was 'well below international business continuity standards and practices',[62] and business continuity planning was variable across UN agencies and duty stations. UN agencies were criticised for failing to take a 'holistic, joined up approach', reducing business continuity to 'security or information technology', and failing to 'develop criteria for prioritizing critical functions and the staff performing them'.[63] Inspectors found the lack of willingness to ring-fence BCM budgets and human resources 'alarming'.[64] In the report, business continuity is considered a crucial mechanism for securing the IO's organisational resilience and political survival, preventing legitimacy deficits, and protecting agent/principal relations:

> Business continuity and within it, emergency preparedness and disaster recovery, are issues of growing importance given the circumstances in which UN organisations operate and their reliable, continuous, uninterrupted operations is an important element of the public image of the United Nations system.[65]

However, throughout the 11 reports analysed, the UN adopts a neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity, bureaucratic resilience-building, and survival. This is partly because the JIU borrows and cites recommendations from international instruments born out of neoliberal corporate framings and good practice. JIU reports published after 2011 focus on external-facing disaster recovery and community resilience-building within states, rather than crisis management within the UN system itself.[66] Crisis is conceptualised as a singular incident following a linear trajectory, and business continuity plans should comprise five stages: emergency response, incident management, continuity, recovery, and resumption.[67] Crisis response is also primarily focused on

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[61] Amadou, 'Business continuity management', p. 224.

[62] Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), 'Business continuity in the UN system', United Nations (2011), p. iii.

[63] JIU, 'Business continuity', p. 12.

[64] JIU, 'Business continuity', pp. 10–12.

[65] JIU, 'Business continuity', p. 1.

[66] Joint Inspection Unit, 'Evaluation of mainstreaming of full and productive employment and decent work by the United Nations system organizations', United Nations (2015); Joint Inspection Unit, 'Review of the integration of disaster risk reduction in the work of the United Nations system in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', United Nations (2019).

[67] JIU, 'Business continuity', p. 11.

technological and financial solutions, such as providing Cloud computing to secure and access data remotely,[68] or enabling public-facing communications.[69] 'Care' is framed in legal terms – undertaking due diligence when assessing risks of investing in new IT solutions that support business continuity[70] and providing a legally defined 'duty of care' to staff in the event of a security incident. Here, focus in on providing physical security to staff working in 'high risk environments' (conflict-affected states).[71] The well-being and care needs of staff during crisis situations are unaccounted for in subsequent BCM-related reports prior to the pandemic. This suggests a Western conceptualisation of staff as constituting the self-reliant, adaptable neoliberal subject and 'generic human capital'[72] to be instrumentalised during crises.

Although in 2011 the JIU recommended delegating responsibility for BCM to UN-system organisations, a 2016 JIU report on succession planning criticised senior leaders for being 'reactive' and failing to undertake 'long-term planning' in the event of major disruption.[73] It was not until 2021 that BCM was described as constituting 'substantive activities of the legislative organs and governing bodies of the UN system' to facilitate 'quick recovery after crisis'.[74] The report observed that 'without an effective business continuity management framework', the UN 'runs the risk of incoherent and uncoordinated responses to interruptions and disruptions thereby amplifying and degrading organizational resilience'.[75] This definition of resilience reflected the 2014 policy on the UN's organisational resilience management system, wherein resilience constitutes the ability of an organisation to 'continually adapt to changing environments in order to deliver on their objectives and to thrive'.[76]

UN response during the Covid crisis (March 2020–August 2021)

When Covid-19 spread to all regions of the world in March 2020, the pandemic posed a threat to the UN's global workforce's health and security and threatened the UN bureaucracy's survival. On 10 March 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres called for the closure of UN-system physical offices, the opening of 'virtual offices', and the implementation of alternative working arrangements, facilitated by remote working (telecommuting). The Secretary-General's 'Administrative Guidelines for Offices on the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak' were different to the UN's existing system-wide Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA), though staff could agree flexible working with duty station managers to accommodate varied time zones and staff caring responsibilities.[77] Guidance was updated in October 2020. Para 2 stated:

> To contain the spread of COVID-19, the Secretary-General and respective heads of entities in duty stations around the world have decided to restrict physical access to UN premises while keeping offices open virtually. In all entities at all duty stations where such decisions have

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[68]Joint Inspection Unit, 'Managing cloud computing services in the United Nations system', JIU/REP/2018/20 (unjiu.org), United Nations (2019), p. 17.

[69]Joint Inspection Unit, 'Public information and communications policies and practices in the United Nations system', JIU/REP/2015/4, United Nations (2015).

[70]JIU, 'Managing cloud computing', p. iii.

[71]JIU, 'Safety and security in the UN system', JIU/REP/2016/9, (p. 45), available at: {https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2016_9_English.pdf}, accessed 10 December 2023.

[72]Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, p. 16.

[73]Joint Inspection Unit, 'Succession planning in the United Nations system organizations', JIU/REP/2016/2, United Nations (2016), p. 21.

[74]Joint Inspection Unit, 'Business continuity management in United Nations system organizations', JUI/REP/2021/6, United Nations (2021).

[75]JIU, 'Business continuity management in United Nations system organizations', p. iv.

[76]United Nations, 'Policy on the organizational resilience management system', CEB/2014/HLCM/17/Rev.1, United Nations (2014).

[77]United Nations, 'Administrative guidelines for offices on the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak', United Nations (10 March 2020).

been made, UN personnel are required to work remotely, unless their physical presence on the premises is necessary to carry out essential work. This is neither optional nor a voluntary telecommuting arrangement between managers and personnel but a mandatory requirement by the Organisation. All personnel must comply. (p. 1)

Since the pandemic, the UN has been criticised for failing to implement a coordinated global response.[78] Several staff interviewed felt this failure was due to weak BCM, sharing concerns raised in JIU reports. An Asian-American male in New York reflected:

The organisation is used to a crisis in a specific geographical location. You'd attend to it and, like all crises, either it goes away or you devote some type of global effort to it. When literally the world is in crisis – the organisation [had] never really dealt with that before. We've dealt with the H1N1 to some extent. Again, that was a different type of crisis. Even Ebola – it seemed global but it really wasn't … This was the first crisis in which not only were we part of it, but we were trying to help. I'm not saying I was disappointed in the [UN], but it was disappointing that as an organisation we weren't able to do more for the global community because we were having to take care of our own needs. Ourselves are victims. We couldn't go anywhere. There was zero travel, so you couldn't assist. It was a difficult time.[79]

A South American man felt the UN was unprepared and lacked adequate business continuity procedures. The UN 'wasn't very nimble'. He remarked: 'It was a huge obstacle for the UN to readjust and adapt organisationally, as well as for the workforce. I think the fact that some of the policies did not necessarily foresee certain circumstances spoke volumes about this.'[80] However, another South-East Asian man felt the Secretariat was more coordinated, proactive, and agile than in previous times, demonstrating strong leadership:

The UN per se, starting from the Secretary-General has been very, very proactive in a way. I think it is one such moment where the UN has really tried to adapt as fast as possible with what's happening outside so that it can actually address what we have to do for our clients with people.[81]

Some parts of the UN system adapted faster than others. Progressive duty stations had business continuity plans and robust IT infrastructures and had normalised telecommuting. In one Middle Eastern field duty station, facilitating gender equality and diversity to support international staff who were parents and carers had been a catalyst for implementing the UN's FWA. A senior male staff member observed:

One of the projects we undertook … was to institute flexible working arrangements. We briefed our staff thoroughly and had guidelines in place. We encouraged some of our staff to have flexible working arrangements … In early February 2019, we migrated our filing system into the Cloud to allow much better flexibility … The IT infrastructure behind it was part of our project to implement FWA.[82]

Employee strategies

Despite institutional failings, staff facilitated business continuity from the bottom up by strategising on their own. However, staff were driven by a parallel survival logic to the UN's institutional survival logics of competition, cohesion, and adaptation and anxiously focused on employee survival.

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[78]Larionova and Kirton, 'Global governance'.

[79]Interviewee 11, conducted online, 11 June 2021.

[80]Interviewee 27, conducted online, 6 October 2021.

[81]Interviewee 28, conducted online, 8 September 2021.

[82]Interviewee 28.

When the remote working directive was announced, all staff interviewed immediately felt invisible, although initially technology was perceived to be a 'power equaliser' within the IO. Over time, some staff felt disadvantaged, notably junior staff, staff working in field duty stations, and women. Sixty-two per cent of women and 38 per cent of men interviewed felt less visible from March 2020 onwards. A West African woman deployed in a European headquarter duty station reflected, 'We [were] each of us working at home, so out of sight, out of mind.'[83] The fear of being 'forgotten' was more pronounced for staff on fixed-term or consultancy contracts (82 per cent of the women and 86 per cent of men). Their insecurities were heightened by the UN's global recruitment freeze, which placed contracted staff in more precarious situations. A Nepalese woman observed:

> Because of the pandemic, there has been a recruitment and hiring freeze that has affected people like me. We'll have to take break because we don't have fixed term positions yet. We are only offered short-term assignments or service deployments in hardship duty stations where nobody wants to go because of the medical conditions and situations. It's difficult. It has become more difficult.[84]

This experience challenges the assumption that, when IOs compete for talent to deepen expertise and authority, they recruit from a candidate-driven market. Amid precarity and job insecurities, staff attempted to secure employee survival in four ways: (1) demonstrating good performance and productivity; (2) being adaptable and resilient; (3) maintaining personal spheres of influence; and (4) building communities of care within the UN. During interviews, staff expose how the UN bureaucracy functions as a competitive employment regime governed by both neoliberal rationalities and nested agent/principal relations, wherein individualising work practices are encouraged and degradation of employment quality normalised. Through these practices, staff engage in bureaucratic resilience-building and organisational survival.

Demonstrating good performance and productivity

Demonstrating an ability to perform effectively and independently while under pressure was a key employee survival strategy during the Covid crisis to ensure staff appeared indispensable, particularly for those on short-term or consultancy contracts. By being productive at the micro-level, staff delivered business critical programmes of work and thus helped the UN bear relevance to external stakeholders. No longer physically visible, staff focused on completing tasks set by line managers, which became supervisors' primary means of staff surveillance and evaluation. An Asian-Australian woman explained: 'Nobody's watching me … I'm expected to produce what I'm expected to produce as agreed and authorised by my supervisor.'[85] Since the UN deemed a broad range of work to be business critical,[86] the hours staff worked increased, despite the pre-existing culture of working long hours. Almost half of staff surveyed worked between 50 and 80 hours per week (41 per cent of women and 48 per cent of men). According to an Asian-American man, workloads increased because the crisis 'added an extra layer of logistical challenges on top of health challenges'[87] and led to the creation of new programmes of work across UN organisations. Staff also found hours increased because they were working virtually across time zones during the travel ban. A Lebanese woman located in a European UN headquarter duty station explained:

> I work a lot. Really, I work a lot and with Covid – it's not only my impression, it's a reality, and it's a reality of everyone around me here – the work doubled or even multiplied by three because we have so many webinars. It's very easy to organise meetings. We're doing so many

[83]Interviewee 3, conducted online, 10 June 2021.
[84]Interviewee 25, conducted online, 27 September 2021.
[85]Interviewee 9, conducted online, 16 June 2021.
[86]JIU, 'Business continuity management', p. 12.
[87]Interviewee 11.

things, so many coordination meetings … Even though I was at home, I had no time to really dedicate to my children. It is not easy at all.[88]

Another woman who worked in 'a new department' with 'a big mandate' observed: 'That's why I'm working so hard. Even at night. My family think I'm a workaholic but I'm not a workaholic. This is what's required of me.'[89] Contracted staff recruited from Global South member states felt significant pressure to work longer hours and be available. One Asian woman working in human resources in a Middle East region duty station explained:

One of the challenges was the time difference … I had the mornings until about twelve o'clock, then I would go on right through till midnight. One, two o'clock, because immediately after that, New York kicked in, and New York's meetings were at nine o'clock, ten o'clock [at night] and then it pushes to eleven o'clock sometimes. I found myself having to attend multiple meetings, including trainings during the pandemic, and it was really, really stressful.[90]

In her interview, the staff member describes how fear of appearing idle drove her to work more, which was counterproductive and affecting her well-being. Yet she also appears to have internalised a neoliberal rationality (manifesting affectively as guilt), leading her to self-govern her behaviour:

Throughout the five-and-a-half months I've been remote working, I've hardly taken any days off … I felt guilty [taking a break] because I felt that the organisation was already doing me a favour by giving me flexible working arrangements and I didn't want to abuse it or misuse it. I didn't want my colleagues or my management to think, 'Oh, yes, she switched off.' I'm not the kind of person who switches off, and I'll just go on and on and on until I find myself in a situation of burnout and I just can't anymore.[91]

Involuntary long working hours and casualisation can lead to employment-quality degradation which negatively affects staff well-being.[92] Yet staff felt compelled to perform as the 'self-made man' and 'high-achieving woman' constructed in neoliberal narratives defining success.[93] Indeed, some staff who could not work longer hours due to caring responsibilities in their personal lives were later punished by unempathetic or unaware managers. A single mother who had returned from maternity leave to a non-family duty station just prior to the pandemic could not transfer to a family duty station due to the travel ban. Lacking childcare, she was less productive and this affected her next deployment. She recalls:

Eight months after the pandemic burst, I was recruited in a family duty station at a lower grade. There was a post at the same functional level as I used to have but a male was recruited instead.[94]

Being adaptable and resilient
In addition to being (over-)productive, staff were keen to prove they were adaptable and resilient employees and in interviews chose to emphasise their ability to perform as the self-reliant, entrepreneurial, and adaptive neoliberal subject. Resilience constituted human resilience – strength of mind, perseverance, mental and physical stamina, and a willingness to self-sacrifice. Staff described engaging in two kinds of adaptation: adapting to changing task environments to

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[88]Interviewee 6, conducted online, 11 June 2021.
[89]Interviewee 7, conducted online, 11 June 2021.
[90]Interviewee 4, conducted online, 11 June 2021.
[91]Interviewee 4.
[92]Thomas et al., 'The enactment of neoliberalism', p. 108.
[93]Segal, *Lean on Me*, p. 3.
[94]Survey respondent, October 2022.

ensure the UN responded to crises; and adapting to the new virtual working environment. A white German woman in a European headquarter duty station reflected:

> For the first eight months, I think of myself as quite adaptable, and the pandemic was a challenge that I could work on. That was very exciting to me, so that motivated me to think of different ways to deliver on my work, both the internal work and the external work. That gave me a lot of drive.[95]

During research interviews and interactions with colleagues, staff also chose to sustain the neoliberal division between public and private spheres, ensuring caring for families and friends was invisibilised and appeared of secondary importance to paid work. A West African woman experienced lockdown in a deep-field duty station and again when working in her West African home for a month. While at home, she used Microsoft Office and other IT applications but struggled to access information. Compensating for her lack of physical presence in the mission, the staff member worked long hours, which was challenging and exhausting since in her personal life she was a mother, wife, and senior member of her extended family:

> I'm the one who draws reports for the region … You need to be there. We have all these monitoring screens. I had to do this work from home. It was really, really difficult. What was the implication? Twenty-four hours watching my screen because when you are there, if you know the situation is calm, you can rest. I was 24 hours, watching my screen … I was drained because … Remember I'm at home. I'm married. My one month of telecommuting was like putting in three times when I was in the office.[96]

The staff member felt compelled to perform as the neoliberal subject, demonstrating to senior managers that she was resilient, professional, and invulnerable. Yet as a Black African woman competing in an unequal employment regime with men, she felt compelled to prove her use-value[97] and worth. Overworking increased her visibility among senior leaders and with it, from her perspective, her employee survivability chances:

> I was able to show how professional I can be. I was able to do work the same as any other person, as a woman. I think the mission leadership was so impressed with my resilience, and still working despite the problems. [We were one of the only] joint operation centres that had continuous reporting and it didn't stop. We were working all the time.[98]

Staff prided themselves on using their initiative to overcome structural deficiencies within the UN bureaucracy, including new deficiencies brought about by telecommuting. This often came at the expense of their well-being. Yet, by being adaptive and resilient workers, staff facilitated bureaucratic resilience, and the UN was better resourced to respond to pandemic-related demands emerging in all regions, reducing the need for the IO to extensively scale back operations.

Maintaining personal spheres of influence
As in times of relative stability, maintaining personal spheres of influence was important during the Covid crisis. Prior to 2020, networking and building relations was important for employee survival, securing contract extensions and if permanent, promotions. A Black African woman working in a European headquarter duty station observed, 'You connect with people who help you advance your career.'[99] However, the UN's bureaucratic culture was described as informally governed by rules

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[95]Interviewee 1, conducted online, 9 June 2021.
[96]Interviewee 10, conducted online, 18 August 2021.
[97]See Georgina Holmes, 'Situating agency, embodied practices and norm implementation in peacekeeping training', *International Peacekeeping*, 26:1 (2019), pp. 55–84.
[98]Interviewee 10.
[99]Interviewee 8, conducted online, 11 June 2021.

that benefited political elites of member states, which meant the 'plebeians'[100] (international civil servants recruited via human resources) competed with well-networked staff attached to political appointments. An Asian-Australian woman explained:

> I think visibility … is a positive factor for anyone, but in the context of the UN … there is a perception that this is a very affiliative organisation. Those leadership that are appointed by the Secretary-General, generally speaking, they bring in their own people without any process, and it is not complicated to do that for that level of people. For example, if they decide to bring in their own communications and their own advisors, they will do it with a very minuscule contract of less than three months. Those who are brought in will stay in that seat for 6 months, 12 months, then 24 months, then they will regularise their presence if the seniors' appointment continues for longer than that.[101]

The challenges of working in the affiliative UN system with nested agent/principal relations was most frequently raised by Black African and Asian women working in headquarter and field duty stations but who felt on the margins of UN workplace cultures. An Afro-American women observed that 'the system is not what you know, it's who knows you and who you know'.[102] A Black African woman in a deep-field duty station explained that some staff 'are in such a privileged place in the employment career' their progression is facilitated by 'diplomacy and contacts'.[103] Another Black woman from the Latin American and Caribbean region, who had had six 11-month contract renewals and was applying for jobs at a lower grade in the hope of becoming permanent, observed that 'hard work alone is not going to do it because there are political appointments and cronyism or favouritism. That sort of thing is rampant.'[104] Being visible and promoting oneself was therefore an important survival tactic in a competitive, unequal employment regime. A Ugandan woman observed: 'If you are naive enough not to actively be visible, people will try and take credit for your work.'[105]

The UN bureaucracy's unequal institutional structures became more pronounced in the first 18 months of the Covid crisis when staff found it harder to network and enlarge their communities of practice at a time of significant job insecurity. Most interviewees lamented the lack of informal networking opportunities across the UN system, with 55 per cent of women and 50 per cent of men feeling less connected to colleagues across the UN than in pre-pandemic times. Staff also lamented loss of a 'human touch'.[106] Of those surveyed, 71 per cent of men and 63 per cent of women proactively networked online during the Covid crisis. Some staff tried to maintain their existing internal and external networks rather than expand them, deemed usual practice previously. A German white woman working a headquarter duty station for five years commented, 'In this pandemic situation, I was taking care of the old networks – conserving my existing network and taking care of that one, but not building up new acquaintances.'[107] Staff in headquarter duty stations felt least visible and connected to external partners (29 per cent of women, 29 per cent of men). Senior staff working closely with the Secretariat or member states could not engage in bilateral meetings due to the travel ban and strategised to stay in regular communication with their external networks.

Some staff took advantage of suddenly being more visible and relevant to senior colleagues in their UN organisation, the Secretariat, and headquarter duty stations and networked to promote their technical expertise. Renewed interest in expertise on inequalities and social justice during

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[100]Interviewee 9.

[101]Interviewee 9.

[102]Interviewee 21, conducted online, 9 September 2021.

[103]Interviewee 26, conducted online, 29 September 2021.

[104]Interviewee 7.

[105]Interviewee 8.

[106]Interviewee 17, conducted online, 15 July 2021.

[107]Interviewee 2, conducted online, 9 June 2021.

the pandemic compelled a Lebanese man and his team to produce 'more policy briefs' which gave them 'greater visibility'. He noted, 'We went on online … and made policy recommendations for the region – so there was a direct spike in demand on visibility.'[108] A white European woman working on gender issues in the WHO seized the new interest in her expertise to promote her agenda.[109] Nevertheless, some staff in Global South regions found their sphere of influence was negatively affected by the global digital divide. For a Venezuelan woman, working 'as normal' was difficult because her host nation lacked the technological infrastructure:

> Remote working in Venezuela is very complicated. While other countries had 30 megabytes of [internet] speed, we might have only two. Also, being in a country where you don't have much security and electricity and running water, it can make things very complicated.[110]

Concerned her professionalism was undermined, unable to showcase her technical expertise, and appearing to fall short of performing as a neoliberal subject, the woman recounted how colleagues in New York lacked empathy, were impatient and disrespectful towards her:

> I was trying to get some colleagues to do an event with me and I lost electricity, and then I had to go to the window to see if I could get some signal on my phone. It was a bit funny because they were angry. They were like, 'Okay, why are you inviting me to have a meeting if you cannot talk to me?' I was like, 'It's not my fault.'[111]

This example demonstrates how even in times of crisis, staff influenced by neoliberal rationalities 'devalue the tender and humane aspects'[112] of their colleagues.

Perceiving their networks were shrinking, women from Global South member states strategised in the virtual working environment to maintain them. The Lebanese woman reflected:

> Since there are no opportunities for field meetings and since the way of working has changed, you don't feel like it is weird or it's not acceptable that you write to anyone in the organisation. I feel like the environment is more enabling for you to talk to anyone. More connected. Maybe the hierarchy, or what you could have perceived as hierarchy, is changing a little bit.[113]

Their efforts were supported by UN Women staff who actively built informal networks across the UN system to flatten the hierarchy. The West African woman recalled:

> During the pandemic, we did a lot of teamworking and Zooming with UN Women. There was a lot, every three days … I think there was a revolution in the whole networking system … because we [had] a gender advisor who is very strong at networking … UN Women was championing networking.[114]

Networking online therefore helped maintain the UN's external spheres of influence and created social cohesion within the IO bureaucracy. Yet since staff felt less visible and less connected and were required to prioritise business-critical work, many of the UN's external informal networks are likely to have shrunk or weakened during the pandemic, although institutional cores remained intact.

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[108]Interviewee 18, conducted online, 16 July 2021.
[109]Interviewee 20, conducted online, 26 August 2021.
[110]Interviewee 22, conducted online, 9 September 2021.
[111]Interviewee 22.
[112]Prasad, 'The gaze of the other', p. 16.
[113]Interviewee 6.
[114]Interviewee 10.

Building communities of care within the UN system

Working longer hours remotely while in lockdown, coupled with unrealistic workloads, took its toll on staff well-being. In June 2020, the WHO conducted a UN system-wide health and well-being staff survey. The majority surveyed felt they had 'healthy' well-being (64 per cent), 22 per cent 'poor' well-being, and 14 per cent 'very poor' well-being.[115] Staff reported experiencing higher levels of sleep disruption, anxiety, and weight loss/gain. Of the 5,539 surveyed, 58 per cent 'worried about the future', and 44 per cent had 'concerns about job security'. Staff also worried about the well-being of family, friends, and care dependants.[116] The findings concur with the findings from this research project, suggesting that the IO's neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity and organisational resilience, which viewed staff as generic human resources to be instrumentalised and exploited, amplified existing staff stress and anxiety generated from casualisation and the emotional labour required to sustain employee survival in normal times.

The UN system's unequal, competitive employment regime impacted staff well-being during the crisis situation, but its effects became more pronounced for staff groups already experiencing discrimination and institutional barriers. This can be seen in the digital divide, which left staff exhausted from overworking or anxious about their reputation or future prospects. Staff spoke of toxic work environments, which continued online. Of those surveyed, 65 per cent of women based in headquarter duty stations and 72 per cent of women in field duty stations said they experienced harassment, bullying, threats, intimidation, aggression, or humiliation from colleagues while working remotely in the first 18 months of the Covid crisis. This compares to 23 per cent of men in headquarter duty stations, though male respondents from field duty stations claim they did not experience any kind of workplace violence. One female survey respondent implied she was tired of being perceived as a generic, neoliberal subject and 'of being treated like a minion rather than a human being'. For another female survey respondent, remote working and the UN's system-wide distributed workforce model challenged 'the antiquated old "presentism" claim' but did not end toxic work cultures:

> [Remote working] intensified existing problems in dysfunctional Sections, Units and Divisions and made it easier for those who belittle, harass, bully and keep others out of the chain of information to do so.[117]

The UN responded to the crisis in care provision by expanding counselling services and developing web-based health and well-being advice. Staff interviewed had mixed views on whether care provision was adequate during the first 18 months of the crisis, observing it was localised and ad hoc. One white European woman commented, 'I think they supported us tremendously … we have a wellness unit, which also teaches us stress management. We have yoga … we have the chance to talk to people.'[118] Others felt their UN organisation did not provide adequate care provision, with some attributing this to the IO's neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity and crisis response. An African woman reflected, 'I think the UN agency has been prioritising IT, prioritising innovation around how to make us more agile, how to make us work faster and better, and how to improve online platforms.'[119] Another female respondent remarked that 'Senior management needed to be more empathetic of one's loss. I lost three wider family members during the pandemic with little support.'[120] Though valued, the counselling service was unable to cope with the demand. The New York-based South Asian man explained: 'I tried to get an appointment with

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[115]United Nations, 'United Nations system COVID-19 staff health and well-being survey: Summary report', United Nations (2020) p. 4.

[116]UN, "United Nations system COVID-19 staff health and well-being survey', pp. 5–6.

[117]Female survey respondent, September 2021.

[118]Interviewee 17.

[119]Interviewee 13.

[120]Female survey respondent, August 2021.

the insurance department [for counselling services], and they said "Oh, we're not taking any more appointments".[121] Consequently, the care deficit in the UN bureaucracy was passed on to staff.

Contradicting the expected behaviours of individualised, self-reliant neoliberal subjects, staff built communities of care to forge collective resilience and mitigate depletion of well-being. The WHO's 2020 staff survey indicated that 64 per cent of respondents 'had help and/or support from colleagues', and 54 per cent from supervisors (compared to 87 per cent receiving support from family).[122] Survey data for this project also revealed that managers and supervisors, particularly men, spent more time engaging with direct reports than in pre-pandemic times. However, men and woman networked horizontally with peers more than vertically or externally with partners/clients. Women spent more time building networks to access emotional support and were grateful that UN Women provided spaces for discussion on gendered concerns and gendered harms experienced within the UN bureaucracy. Staff also instituted new digital workplace practices, routines, and rituals to strengthen social bonds and welfare support in the absence of formal and informal face-to-face interaction. A Romanian woman in a European duty station explained, 'We started to create traditions. Every Friday we had lunch or breakfast together and we met with a cake for lunch on someone's birthday.'[123] These workplace practices increased employee belonging, reduced anxiety, and built human resilience. The Romanian woman reflected, 'I feel much more secure and much more connected.'[124]

Staff welcomed the cultural shift towards adopting an arguably feminist ethics of care, and many were grateful that discussing health and well-being was valued and normalised. Being vulnerable and dependent were less likely to be perceived as personal weaknesses preventing staff from performing as neoliberal subjects. One woman observed that prior to virtual office working, both 'the institution' and 'other colleagues' thought someone who reached out for counselling support was 'someone who was not able to cope and who is fragile or vulnerable, but now it's a normal thing'.[125] Yet as the South Asian man explained, the cultural shift was not a top-down initiative led by the IO bureaucracy's leadership but developed organically by staff from the bottom up:

> People are more empathetic now than they would be pre-crisis because they're going through the same thing. Literally, your director is probably having the same family problems and the same family challenges and the same work challenges as you are. I think it's more empathy than the organisation making a big change.[126]

His view was shared by the African woman who spoke of how, within her department, they had 'open sessions' with teams and departments to discuss well-being concerns because 'there's no misconception, there's no negative stereotypes towards any staff [requiring help]'.[127]

Staff efforts to institute stronger communities of care contributed to stabilising the UN bureaucracy's affiliative, networked structure by strengthening social bonds and connections. Helping the workforce stay mentally strong and resilient amid existential threats and threats brought about by the international bureaucracy's employment model, staff facilitated IO survival. Giving and receiving care were embedded in the 'ordinary social practice'[128] of staff and communities within in the UN system, though often layered onto staff caring responsibilities outside the IO. A significant amount of invisible emotional labour was spent maintaining and expanding communities of care, yet staff and institutional efforts to improve care provision merely served as a sticking plaster since the UN's underlying institutional pathologies persisted.

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[121] Interviewee 11.

[122] UN, 'United Nations system COVID-19 staff health and well-being survey', p. 6.

[123] Interviewee 5, conducted online, 10 June 2021.

[124] Interviewee 5.

[125] Interviewee 12, conducted online, 13 June 2021.

[126] Interviewee 11.

[127] Interviewee 13.

[128] Sandra Laugier, *Politics of the Ordinary: Care, Ethics and Forms of Life* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2020), p. 3.

Strengthening hierarchical coalitions within the IO bureaucracy

Despite staff efforts to secure employee survival and maintain spheres of influence, there is evidence to suggest the switch to virtual offices during the Covid crisis saw a strengthening of older racial and gendered internal power hierarchies born out of colonialism and the UN's Euro-American-centric design. In previous decades, the UN's business model meant power resided in headquarter duty stations in the so-called politically and economically stable Global North, while UN project work focused on Global South states, considered unstable. Prior to the pandemic, the North–South power imbalance was being addressed under longer-term decolonising processes. Several business-critical functions had been relocated to regional duty stations to redistribute system-wide administration. A senior male staff member in a Middle East office explained: 'There's been a certain basket of responsibilities and jobs that were just reserved for HQ and the others for the field [duty] stations. ... The authority to approve things has been decentralised since 2018.'[129] A view was held that the Global North–South hierarchy was diminishing, though all duty stations were hierarchal in structure. He observed, 'Within each of the stations there's that recognition still of the hierarchy. The structure is not yet that flat. It depends on the duty station.'[130]

Yet, as in military institutions, the UN bureaucracy's hierarchy had a specific function during crisis situations. To illustrate this, he recounted a past deployment to a deep-field duty station:

> In [the 2010s], I was in [North Africa]. Fighting was [heavy] and our compound was subjected to attacks – think RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] landing on your roof in the accommodation ... We had to evacuate to Tunisia and that was when the hierarchy kicked in ... The deputy froze and we were evacuating ... I actually had to hold his hand and literally dragged him into his car ... With the deputy freezing, I had to step in [and] marshalled the rest of the people into vehicles ... Otherwise, we would have been cornered in the compound ... Thankfully [people] recognised that authority and that hierarchy and people did follow ... Had we moved a bit later, I think we would have had some casualties ... Without that hierarchy, people [would have been] all over the place.[131]

This story is a metaphor for another way the UN's hierarchy functioned in the first 18 months of the Covid crisis. Our research suggests that some of the UN system's flatter institutional ways of working were replaced with traditional, hierarchical approaches that strengthened and stabilised the UN system's centralised core, with strategic-level decision-making primarily residing in the Global North. This can be observed by analysing how individual staff, teams, and field duty stations experienced being visible and invisible during the crisis. As our case study shows, staff innovated and strategised to deliver business-critical work and actively networked horizontally and vertically. Despite these efforts, staff in field duty stations felt the most invisible overall and least connected to senior staff in UN headquarter duty stations. Of those staff surveyed from field duty stations, 57 per cent of men and 43 per cent of women felt less visible than prior to the pandemic. This compares to 36 per cent of men and 57 per cent of women based in Global North headquarter duty stations. No men and only 6 per cent of women located in field duty stations felt more visible. However, 20 per cent of women and 36 per cent of men located in headquarter duty stations felt more visible. Staff working in field duty stations felt less connected to senior management (47 per cent of women; 57 per cent of men) compared with staff working in headquarter duty stations (43 per cent of women; 50 per cent of men). Remote working also led to the emergence of 'discriminatory hierarchical coalitions' where supervisors chose to work with some staff but not others.[132] Staff in field duty stations felt the most excluded from important meetings (47 per cent of women; 43 per cent of men) than in pre-pandemic times. Exclusion from meetings occurred in headquarter duty

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[129]Interviewee 28.
[130]Interviewee 28.
[131]Interviewee 28.
[132]Tirole, 'Hierarchies and bureaucracies', p. 205.

stations according to 30 per cent of women and 35 per cent of men, but less frequently. Additionally, staff based in field duty stations felt they received less information from senior leadership teams to help them do their jobs (44 per cent of women and 43 per cent of men), compared to those that received more information (13 per cent of women, 14 per cent of men). A slightly different trend occurred in headquarter duty stations, where slightly more women surveyed received more information (29 per cent, compared to 27 per cent who said they received less), while only 7 per cent of men in headquarter duty stations received less, with the majority stating 'no difference' (71 per cent). Prioritising central responses to the pandemic was thought to be a primary reason why staff in field duty stations felt less connected to headquarter leadership teams. A Nepalese man who had worked in the UN for over 15 years explained: 'Headquarters only looks at countries that are in severe crisis. They get reports where there are more cases of Covid and more deaths, more requirements that the national governments will need to support.'[133] This meant field duty stations were competing to be in the line of sight of the headquarter offices, though some regionally based staff built connections with neighbouring field duty stations to coordinate responses and mitigate competition. Their strategies concur with strategic management research suggesting that the ability of employees to resolve problems collectively is crucial for organisational survival,[134] further demonstrating how staff adapted to overcome institutional pathologies. Yet, with decision-making residing more in Global North headquarter offices, the UN inadvertently promoted a Western, neoliberal dynamic that Ling describes as an 'I lead, you follow partnership,'[135] reflecting patriarchal and paternal colonial and neocolonial relations.

Conclusion

This article has made important conceptual and empirical contributions to existing research on IO survival and advances understandings of how IO bureaucracies are informed by raced and gendered global power stratifications by examining relationalities between business continuity management, bureaucratic resilience-building practices, and staff behaviours. We have contended that business continuity is a necessary component of IO survival. An international bureaucracy's workforce needs to be productive, demonstrate technical expertise, and deliver work programmes for the IO to accrue power, authority, and legitimacy. In crisis situations, IO bureaucracies that fail to function productively and scale back their operations risk losing power and authority. They also risk losing cognitive authority on global issues,[136] which is particularly important during a global crisis when IOs should provide leadership. As Buchanan and Keohane observe, an IO loses integrity and its 'legitimacy is seriously called into question' if it 'exhibits a pattern of egregious disparity between its actual performance' and 'its self-proclaimed procedures or major goals'.[137] During a global crisis, business disruptions, and technological failures, a reduced workforce and the prioritisation of business-critical workloads create disparities between actual performance and expected performance. We have also contended that staff facilitate business continuity and build bureaucratic resilience organically from the bottom up, which in turn supports IO survival. Yet despite the expectation that staff should be resilient and adaptable, the UN's neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity and crisis response prioritises IO survival over staff well-being.

Adopting a post-colonial feminist theoretical approach allowed us to examine the everyday of institutional life in relation to global race and gendered power hierarchies by defamiliarising workplace practices. The Covid crisis defamiliarised the UN's organising systems and practices, enabling

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[133]Interviewee 25.

[134]Josef Rosenas, 'Beyond economic criteria: A humanistic approach to organizational survival,' *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78 (2008), pp. 447–62.

[135]L. H. M. Ling, 'Cultural chauvinism and the liberal international order: "West versus Rest" in Asia's financial crisis', in Chowdhry and Nair (eds), *Power, postcolonialism and international relations*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 115–41 (p. 119).

[136]André Broome and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Seeing like an international organisation', *New Political Economy*, 17:1 (2012), pp. 1–16.

[137]Buchanan and Keohane, 'The legitimacy of global governance', p. 422.

us to critically examine UN workplace cultures differently. In particular, it exposed a more acute, systemic crisis emerging from the IO bureaucracy's workforce model. Yet the Secretary-General's Alternative Working from Home Directive, combined with the global recruitment freeze, further entrenched the degradation of employment, heightened job insecurities, and increased anxiety for staff. In a competitive, raced, and gendered employment regime shaped by neoliberal rationalities and agent/principal relations, staff were driven by a parallel survival logic to the UN's institutional survival logics of competition, cohesion, and adaptation, and fixated on employee survival. The analysis therefore reveals the limitations of the UN's neoliberal, technocratic approach to business continuity, which conceives staff as generic human capital to be instrumentalised, exploited, and governed, and demonstrates how IO behaviours that make sense from one perspective may seem self-defeating from another.[138] Addressing care deficits, staff organically created communities of care, which strengthened social cohesion and helped preserve the vitality of the UN's bureaucracy, though increasing staff emotional labour. In 2021, a new JIU system-wide report on BCM recommended that more mental health support be built into business continuity planning. Yet this alone will not prevent a repetition of staff experiences should another large-scale crisis occur.

This article has introduced business continuity as a conceptual tool for understanding how IOs seek to survive during times of crisis and persist in times of relative stability and opens up a new research agenda. Indeed, future research could analyse different approaches to business continuity and their impacts on staff within specific UN specialised agencies or regional IOs and investigate how during crisis situations, business continuity management influences or hinders competition between IOs.

Appendix

UN reports analysed:

Joint Inspection Unit (2011) 'Business continuity in the United Nations system', A/67/83/Add.1, A_67_83_Add.1-EN BC recommendations 2012.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit (2015) 'Public information and communications policies and practices in the United Nations system', JIU/REP/2015/4, https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2015_4_English.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit (2015) 'Evaluation of mainstreaming of full and productive employment and decent work by the United Nations system organizations - Summary Report' JIU/REP/2015/1, unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/Other related documents/Supplementary paper to JIU_REP_2015_1.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit. (2016) 'Safety and security in the United Nations system' JIU/REP/2016/9, https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2016_9_English.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit. (2016) 'Succession Planning in the United Nations System Organizations', JIU/REP/2016/2, https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2016_2%20_English.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit. (2019) 'Managing cloud computing services in the United Nations system', JIU/REP/2019/5, JIU/REP/2018/20 (unjiu.org), accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit (2019) 'Review of the integration of disaster risk reduction in the work of the United Nations system in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' JIU/REP/2019/3, JIU_REP_2015_1_English.pdf (unjiu.org), accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit. (2020) 'Policies and platforms in support of learning: towards more coherence, coordination and convergence', JIU/REP/2020/2, jiu_rep_2020_2_english_0.pdf (unjiu.org), accessed 10 December 2023.

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[138]Barnett and Coleman, 'Designing police', p. 36.

Joint Inspection Unit (2020) 'Review of mainstreaming environmental sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system', JIU/REP/2020/8, accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit. (2020). Enterprise risk management: approaches and uses in United Nations system organizations, JIU/REP/2020/5, JIU/REP/2020/5 (unjiu.org), accessed 10 December 2023.

Joint Inspection Unit (2021) 'The United Nations Security Management System Security Policy Manual JIU/REP/2021/3, https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_rep_2021_3_english.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

United Nations (2014). 'Policy on the Organizational Resilience Management System', CEB/2014/HLCM/17/Rev.1 unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Policy on the Organizational Resilience Management System-Revised_18 Jan 2021.pdf, accessed 10 December 2023.

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