

# Positivity and kindness during pandemic times

**Ilaria Boncori**



## **Managing public/private spaces as a parent and academic**

*I find that time stretches in an unnatural way during this pandemic. Minutes sink into what appears to be an endless whirlwind of virtual meetings and make our days both incredibly short and tiringly prolonged. The working from home mode, unusual for me, makes the boundaries between work and private life very blurred, with week days and weekends morphing into each other.*

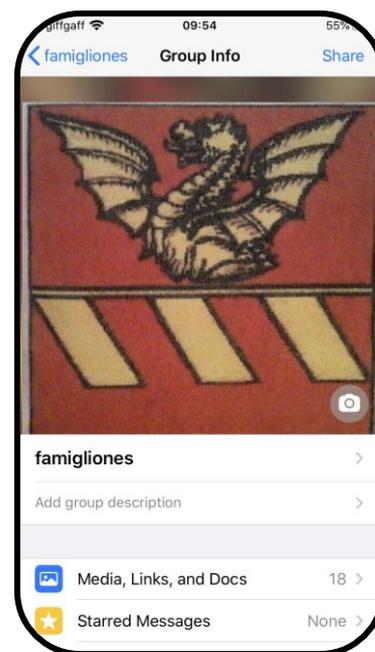
Towards the end of March 2020, approximately a week into formal 'lockdown' mode, I wrote some reflections on my experience of living and working under these unprecedented circumstances. My narrative then was exuding anxiety and exhaustion. Although much of that 'Neverending Shift' story still remains unchanged (Boncori, 2020), I am now more settled into this new context, and much more aware of the many acts of kindness and solidarity that my family and I have experienced or witnessed over the past 10 weeks whilst working from home and caring for each other.

## **Connectedness in adversity**

At the macro level, this pandemic has imposed some cruel solidarity and empathy across nations, which I had not been able to experience before in my lifetime. My parents' generation in Europe, and the one before them, were touched by global wars that tainted their own lands with blood, death and tragedy in a way that I have been lucky not to experience. This world-wide pandemic has reached across continents, reminding us just how much we are all interconnected and how inextricably our lives depend upon each other for health, food, communication and many other things. Of course, a number of people have used the excuse of these circumstances to foment racism, xenophobia and blind ignorance, but a heart-warming number of examples of kindness and positive behaviour have also maintained – and at times rejuvenated – my trust in the potential of our humanity. Here I would like to focus on individual acts of humanity, solidarity and kindness rather than those implemented at the national, or international level. Some of these examples come from individuals in their personal capacity, others from people with institutional roles in my workplace, in the now more than ever overlapping spheres of professional and private life.

## You are not alone: life-affirming acts of solidarity

Solidarity has taken many forms, but one type especially is what I would call the 'you are not alone' strand of positivity. People have been disclosing their challenges, vulnerabilities, emotions and fears both via social media and in more intimate virtual meetings. Colleagues all over the world have set up projects, networks, support mechanisms, special issue calls, funding and events to share the experience of going through a global pandemic. This helps bring to the fore the huge cost of this situation for a number of groups, highlighting the many inequalities that have been exacerbated, and the implications of these on people's personal and professional lives. It has been somewhat comforting, albeit demoralising, to know that others are having the same issues I am witnessing in my life. Also, the acknowledgement of the many more significant problems currently preoccupying others has helped to develop a sense of belonging and perspective in our life stories. We have shared our days and environments through often-invasive Zoom meetings, but we have also been able to comfort small children, families and friends with video messages and calls that bring us closer together.



## We are here for each other

At work, I have been lucky enough to appreciate just how empathetic and caring many of my colleagues are. This is the positive strand I call 'we are here for each other'. Although we are working intensely and at pace



to put in place contingency plans to support our community of staff and students in the coming year, many people have taken the time to check in on each other, organise virtual catch-up coffees and reach out for friendly chats. Some other colleagues have volunteered to cover certain tasks or review workload allocation to cater for each other's needs and share the burden of urgent duties and cumbersome commitments. A number of people across my professional networks have sent me kind messages to check how my family is doing in Italy, volunteering forms of support large and small. Getting in touch with colleagues and friends who have particular challenges, who are alone, who suffer from mental health issues, who live within contexts of disquiet and abuse, can really make a huge impact on somebody's life. I have also been more aware of the many things I had taken for granted whilst still working in the office.

For example, my next door colleague who stops by and asks how I am with a smiling 'good morning' every day; the administrator I can exchange a relaxed joke with; the biscuits baked by a colleague in the main office; the impromptu visits of someone I used to work with years ago who often drags me away from my emails and out to share a chat over breakfast in a campus café.

### **The joy of small things**

Another strand of positivity I have experienced stems from what I interpret as the 'joy of small things', and it comes from colleagues, friends and family members. I have taken great delight in initiating or reciprocating these small acts of kindness to bring someone a smile, a little surprise, a small form of enjoyment. I have received surprises through the letterbox – a pack of chocolates, flowers left by a neighbour, handwritten letters from lands far away, a sweet Easter bunny for my daughter and a little gift from one of her nursery friends. Neighbours have volunteered to run chores, buy nappies for my daughter, add to their weekly grocery shop or chemist run. I have even received unexpected gifts: artichokes (my favourite!), books, and plants for my garden that make me feel loved. At the same time, these gestures become a reminder of the people we live and work with, the relationships we nurture, the connections we value and the focus we should maintain on what are the cornerstones of our existence, which become all more important whilst and after experiencing unsettling and troubling times.



## Reference

Boncori, I. (2020). The Never-ending Shift: A feminist reflection on living and organizing academic lives during the coronavirus pandemic. *Gender, Work & Organization*. Online first <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12451>

## About the author

**Ilaria** is a senior lecturer in management, marketing and entrepreneurship at the University of Essex, where she also serves as a faculty dean (humanities) deputised for all taught provision across seven departments. She is a member of the Humanistic Management Steering Group, a role she feels is deeply aligned with her view of effective management and her belief that people are the most important part of any business.

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