Covid-19: A Human Security Analysis

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ABSTRACT

From a human security perspective, the concept and practices of security should be oriented around the everyday needs of individuals and communities, whatever the source or nature of threat they may face. Human security has lost some momentum as an intellectual project as a result of its imprecise definition and scope. In addition, in policy terms, human security has been eclipsed by a resurgence of geopolitical visions of security, reinforced by a rise in nationalism and great power rivalry. Yet Covid-19 demonstrates how human security brings added value as an analytical and normative framework. The pandemic exposed the limitations of the traditional security paradigm and it demonstrated that traditional measures of national security are no assurance of societal resilience or individual protection. Moreover, from a human security perspective, Covid-19 exposes the structural inequalities and contradictions which underpin norms of security in many societies, given that experiences of security and insecurity are shaped by gender, socio-economic inequalities, and ethnicity.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the message of human security.[1] Security analysis and policy, if they are effective and legitimate, must be oriented around the everyday challenges faced by individuals and communities, whatever the source of these challenges. Traditional, state-centric models of national security – which privilege a military, state-centric vision of territorial integrity and defence – are a seemingly inevitable feature of politics, but they do not assure even a minimal level of human welfare. For affluent societies, Covid-19 overturned all established assumptions of what security means, where threats to security come from, and how such threats should be addressed. For economically deprived societies, the pandemic was a reminder of the reality they have always been conscious of: challenges such as preventable disease, pollution, malnutrition and extreme poverty are the primary existential threats, and far more so than threats associated with the traditional security paradigm.

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Human security emerged in the 1990s and represented a challenge to the traditional national security worldview that broadly dominated politics and budgetary decisions. The concept gained traction in some policy settings – in particular in multilateral organisations and civil society – and within some academic security studies circles, but it arguably never reached its critical potential either as a concept or as a policy framework. In recent years, the resurgence of traditional security politics in a transitional international order has led to a further retreat of the human security idea. Yet the Covid-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the added value of the human security vision and demonstrates why the concept deserves renewed attention in academic and policy circles. This article makes the case for this. It proceeds as follows in four main sections.

Firstly, a brief background to the emergence and main arguments of the human security concept is provided, including a discussion of the controversies and critiques that have limited its traction. Secondly, from a human security perspective, the article demonstrates how Covid-19 exposes flaws in the traditional security model, with reference to basic human needs, however, defined. Third, from a critical human security perspective, the article explores how Covid-19 exposes underlying social, ethnic and gender inequalities. From this perspective, the pandemic cannot be regarded as a public health challenge in a discrete or unique sense, since the impacts and costs are not uniformly experienced and they reflect broader structural inequalities and vulnerabilities. Thus, although Covid-19 may be thought of as unprecedented in its impact – at least in recent historical perspective – the direct and indirect insecurities that it exposed and exacerbated are perennial and exist irrespective of the pandemic. From the perspective of those suffering structural insecurities, these are, therefore, not unprecedented times, even if these insecurities have been amplified. Whilst affluent communities are relatively insulated, the impact of Covid-19 brings into relief existing insecurities of gender violence, racial and ethnic discrimination, and the precariousness of economically insecure people in all societies, both rich and poor. Fourthly, in conclusion, the article considers the implications of Covid-19 in terms of how security and threats to security are conceptualised and addressed. It considers if the shock of Covid-19 will encourage a paradigm change in the international security discourse in favour of the human security model – something that no other policy challenge, including climate change, has effectively managed to achieve.

Despite the analytical and definitional weaknesses associated with the human security concept – and the reluctance of many national policy actors to genuinely embrace it – it provides a compelling framework for understanding the implications of Covid-19 for security analysis and policy. Whilst security studies scholars have generally responded to the negative securitisation of Covid-19 in a critical vein, this article argues, to the contrary, that the positive framing of human security has both analytical insight and valuable policy implications. Although the differentiated impacts of Covid-19 are becoming readily apparent, the added value of a human security perspective is to situate this subject within vying meanings of *security* as a concept and raise implications for how this concept is understood politically. The article uses publicly available official data from national and international sources as well as epidemiological data from secondary sources. The principal empirical focus is upon the UK and the US, given the importance of analysing the impact of Covid-19 in economically and militarily strong states, rather than more 'fragile' settings in the Global South which are more typically the focus for

human security research. These cases also bring rigorous and easily accessible data. Broader international data are drawn upon where appropriate in order to illustrate wider empirical patterns.

The emergence of human security

Human security emerged as a policy concept in the 1990s, at a time when there appeared to be increasing political space for non-traditional security ideas. The concept also gained some traction within academic debates, where the security studies field was moving beyond the military, state-centric models which had dominated analysis throughout the Cold War. Within this space, human security also found resonance in the normative turn in International Relations and security studies, which reflected a growing concern with the ethics and justice of security and insecurity in global context. Human security has made a significant, but often contested, contribution to the evolving security studies field over two decades, and it has provided a framework for state and non-state actors that are committed to human-centred policies and to addressing the human impacts of insecurity.

The 1994 UN Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report is often seen as the origin of 'human security' as a specific policy concept and label, although its historical antecedents can be found much earlier. The report (UNDP 1994, 23) stated that human security 'means, first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities'. It argued that

> For most people, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Will they and their families have enough to eat? Will they lose their jobs? Will their streets and neighbourhoods be safe from crime? Will they be tortured by a repressive state? Will they become a victim of violence because of their gender? (UNDP 1994, 22)

In dealing with 'personal security', the report (UNDP 1994, 30) lists seven types of threat, and notably, the first one reads 'Threats from the state (physical torture)', and also includes 'Threats directed against women (rape, domestic violence)'. The 1994 UNDP report was pioneering; it was certainly unusual for such issues to be defined as security challenges at that time in UN circles.

The 1994 UNDP report influenced international policy debates relating to security and development, and some countries embraced the concept as a foreign policy platform. A number of human security initiatives have been sponsored by governments, such as the Commission on Human Security (2003) and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001). The Human Security Network – a grouping of thirteen governments committed to people-centred development and security – has also helped to operationalise human security and keep it on the diplomatic agenda.

International organisations have taken the lead in integrating human security into their programmes. UNDP has implemented human security projects at the field level in conflict-prone and developing societies, designed to enhance the everyday welfare of individuals and communities. The UN High Commission for Refugees has also engaged with human security as a framework, aimed at prioritising the rights and

needs of forcibly displaced people (UNHCR 2012). The UN's human security work has been facilitated by the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS), established in 1999. This supports activities which translate the human security concept into practical action, in order to provide 'concrete and sustainable benefits to vulnerable people and communities threatened in their survival, livelihood and dignity' (UNTFHS 2021). The UN Human Security Unit, established in 2004, has sought to maintain policy momentum in support of the human security concept.

The 2005 UN World Summit provided a boost for the human security agenda in diplomatic circles. The UN-endorsed human security through the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair and free from fear and want (UN General Assembly 2005, para. 143). Following the World Summit, UN General Assembly resolution 66/290 of October 2012 further endorsed human security, and this was operationalised in a report of the Secretary-General (UN Secretary-General 2013). Regional organisations – including the European Union and the Association of South-East Asian Nations – have also been active in using the concept as a policy platform (Martin and Kaldor 2009; Hernandez et al. 2019).

Although human security has remained on the multilateral agenda, the critical essence of the concept – as a challenge to traditional, state-centric security practices – has arguably retreated over the last 25 years (see Newman 2016). The UNDP's 1994 vision of human security identified a tension between human security and the traditional security agenda, but that challenge to national security thinking is no longer reflected in the UN agenda. Most tellingly, the UN approach to human security does not now acknowledge that states may be the primary threat to human security. Resolution 66/290 suggests that 'governments retain the primary role and responsibility for ensuring the survival, livelihood and dignity of their citizens', even though it is sometimes states which are unwilling or unable to protect the fundamental security needs of individuals. It is not surprising that the UN does not acknowledge the role of states as a potential threat to the welfare of individuals, but it nevertheless exposes the fundamental weakness of the inter-governmental approach to human security. Since the UN is a key actor in the human security movement – as an operational stakeholder and a normative leader – this is a central controversy in human security debates and a focus for critics of the concept. The human security movement has also lost momentum at a time of rising nationalism and a changing international order in which traditional security concerns and actors are resurgent.

An assessment as to whether policy makers engage with (or commit to) human security is obviously subjective, and there is certainly evidence that states, individually and collectively through international organisations, have made commitments which reflect a normative shift in some areas. The work of UN agencies, with the support of states, and the commitments of the Human Security Network of states, are illustrations of this. But the general consensus is that the human security concept, in line with the definition used in this paper, has not been genuinely embraced by foreign policy elites, and this can be illustrated with reference to increasing social, economic and health disparities, arms transfers, and human rights standards in many countries, amongst other things. Moreover, the conventional national security mindset remains deeply embedded into most policy establishments. Human security generally needs to be seen not as an alternative paradigm but rather as a parallel set of policy programmes – hence, national military agencies in some countries now have 'human security' units or activities.

Academic debates: from innovation to stagnation?

The starting point of human security scholarship was to challenge the dominant military, state-centric 'national security' worldview (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2006; McIntosh and Hunter 2017; Andersen-Rodgers and Crawford 2018. This background draws upon Newman 2010, 2016). From this perspective, for most people in the world the principal threats to 'security' come from disease, environmental degradation, severe hunger or criminal violence, rather than from an external state adversary. For many people, a greater threat may come from their own state or government. At the core of the human security literature is, therefore, a desire to challenge the dominance of 'high politics' in security policy and analysis, and to envision a reorientation around individual everyday experiences of deprivation and insecurity. This is not to argue that state security is unavoidably in conflict with human security; an effective and accountable state is ideally the principal provider of security. However, the human security perspective does imply that the conventional model of national security does not always deliver individual security, and that a prioritisation of state security can and sometimes does directly threaten human welfare. In this way, within the human security framework, the orthodox model of security is generally a necessary but not a sufficient condition for human welfare. People in states that are 'secure' according to the traditional concept of security can be perilously insecure in terms of their personal existence – a point highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic but also other non-traditional security challenges. According to the human security scholarship, this provides a compelling case for revising the meaning and operationalisation of 'security' within modern societies.

The added value and intellectual traction of human security have been limited by a number of controversies played out in a debate that is largely in the past and unresolved. Space does not permit a thorough review of the relevant literature here, which can be found elsewhere (Gasper and Gómez 2015; Newman 2016). For its critics, human security is problematised by a vague definition, lack of analytical rigour, and ambiguous scope. Some scholars advocate a narrow focus on direct harm, in particular related to violence and persecution (MacFarlane and Khong 2006). Others argue that the concept must be entirely open in terms of the types of challenges that it securitises – including development issues and health – given their global impact (Commission on Human Security 2003; Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2006). Critics (Krause 2004; Mack 2004) argued that the broad approach to human security is so inclusive that it does not allow analysts or policy makers to prioritise amongst different types of threats, or to measure human security with precision.

Some security studies scholars (Booth 2007; Chandler 2008; Christie 2010) have been sceptical of the policy orientation of human security and its use as a policy framework by international organisations and some governments. According to this critique, even though human security can be found in policy discourse, it has made negligible difference to policy outcomes and has not re-shaped the broader practices of security in progressive ways. Human security, as it has evolved around policy stakeholders, tends to be framed around state actors, yet state elites cannot be truly committed to promoting a human security agenda because the state is embedded in the structural conditions from which insecurities arise (Bellamy and McDonald 2002; McCormack 2011).

A further critique is that human security has generally not been used to engage with the key theoretical security studies debates that have defined the field, including securitisation (Buzan 2004). Rather, human security advocates have often been oblivious to the potential hazards of securitising issues such as underdevelopment, migration and human trafficking (Neocleous 2008). There is also the charge that human security is blind to the gender dimensions of security and insecurity (Marhia 2013. See also Truong, Wieringa, and Chhachhi 2007; Hudson 2018; Reardon and Hans 2018). Moreover, by focusing upon abstract individuals as the referent object, human security ignores the cultural and societal context of security challenges (Shani 2011). A further aspect of the critical challenge to human security arises from its apparent liberal orientation (Mgbeoji 2006; Richmond 2011). According to this critique, the concept assumes that deprived people in the 'developing' world are helpless victims, and therefore, human security provides the normative rationale for liberal intervention aimed at 'saving' disadvantaged populations and promoting certain values as universal.

According to some of the critical perspectives, the progressive essence of human security – if it ever existed – has been lost, leaving something devoid of transformational potential (Bosold 2011). Some scholars (Newman 2010, 2016; Hudson 2018) have proposed a critical vision of human security, an approach which seeks to deconstruct and critique existing institutions and norms as they relate to insecurity, explore the underlying sources of insecurity, and yet remain policy relevant. However, many security studies scholars have not engaged with the concept – or are openly skeptical of it (Booth 2007; Grayson 2008; Begby and Burgess 2009; Christie 2010; Richmond 2011; Turner, Cooper, and Pugh 2011). Beyond the early theoretical debates – which contested the significance, definition and added value of human security as a concept – more recent scholarship has employed human security as a counterpoint against traditional security narratives within a range of applied topics. Migration (Purkayastha 2018) climate change (Busby 2018; Daoudy 2020), peacekeeping and peacebuilding (Zeigermann 2020; Gilder 2021) remain popular applications of the human security concept and demonstrate its ongoing appeal in security studies and international relations.

The analytical and political controversies that beset the human security concept cannot be easily resolved since many of them rest upon fundamental ontological and ideological differences. Nevertheless, a critically attuned human security framework responds to many of the challenges directed against the concept. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the core arguments that have underpinned human security since the concept emerged – in a sense upholding human security as an empirical argument – and more importantly, a human security perspective on Covid-19 provides avenues for bridging the divide between critical security analysis and policy. Against this backdrop of skepticism towards human security within much of the theoretical security studies field, this paper argues that a critical human security perspective provides insight into the impact of Covid-19 which traditional security approaches are largely blind to. From this perspective, the measure of relevance for human security studies is not to conform to a discrete scope or definition, but rather it is the ability to provide a platform for scholars to raise critiques and envision alternative practices. The rest of this article makes the case that human security is a persuasive framework for understanding Covid-19 as a challenge to traditional conceptions of national security, and as a way

to critically understand the inherently political and socially constructed nature of security norms.

Human security and Covid-19: exposing the limitations of traditional security in a globalised era

Since human security compels analysts to consider threats to human life irrespective of the source of those threats, it has reinforced the widening of the security agenda in recent decades and the – sometimes controversial – tendency to securitise non-military challenges. As a key example of this, the concept has been used to explore the broad consequences of climate change in terms of individual livelihoods and conflict (Barnett and Adger 2007; O'Brien, St Clair, and Kristoffersen 2010; Elliott and Caballero-Anthony 2012). The objective in this approach is to envision a more comprehensive model of security and to attract greater attention, and sometimes resources, to addressing climate change as a 'security' challenge. The argument here is now mainstream: climate change represents an existential threat to life which transcends all the boundaries and assumptions of conventional security thinking. For similar reasons, human security has been popular amongst social scientists exploring public health. Health challenges – including preventable, communicable disease – are securitised to underscore the fact that poor health undermines the life chances of far more people than those threatened or killed by traditional security challenges (Caballero-Anthony 2018), and challenges such as HIV/AIDS are an existential threat to some societies in a manner which cannot be explained through traditional security thinking (Fourie and Schönteich 2001). Research in this area also highlights how health challenges can have a compounding impact in conjunction with other non-traditional threats (Iqbal 2006). A key message is that more resources and political attention need to be invested in public healthcare (Anand 2012). It is also interesting to note that in the year in which the landmark report on human security was published by the UN Human Development Programme, the journal *Health and Human Rights* was launched, exploring the links between human rights and public health.

Against this background the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed and reinforced many of the existing arguments of human security as it relates to public health in global perspective, hitherto demonstrated most obviously in the Global South. Since the 1980s HIV has killed more than 32 million people, and whilst antiretroviral therapy has greatly reduced mortality rates, in poor societies where access to treatment is scarce 770,000 people died from HIV-related causes in 2018 (World Health Organisation 2019). Other communicable diseases also have a large impact, such as lower respiratory infections (3 million deaths worldwide in 2016), diarrhoeal diseases (1.4 million deaths in 2016), and tuberculosis (death toll of 1.3 million in 2016) (World Health Organisation 2018). There is a clear pattern in terms of the mortality rates associated with these diseases: over half of all deaths in low-income countries in 2016 were caused by communicable diseases, conditions arising during pregnancy and childbirth, and nutritional deficiencies, compared to less than 7% of deaths in high-income countries (World Health Organisation 2018). The public health impact of deprivation more generally has a huge impact in low-income societies; approximately 3.1 million children die from under-nutrition each year (UNICEF 2018), the vast majority in the Global South. Of these, HIV/AIDS

was most conspicuously securitised internationally – until effective treatments were developed – because it was regarded as a global challenge. Malaria – which killed over 400,000 people in 2018, 67% of them under 5 years old (World Health Organisation 2020) – is a further example of a public health 'crisis' for low and middle-income countries that is regarded somewhat less as a global challenge. Even before the new coronavirus, therefore, public health was at the heart of the human security worldview, and pandemics have been explicitly analysed as security challenges in the past (Enemark 2009).

Covid-19 has had a major, global impact because of the rate and globalised nature of the pandemic although, in historical perspective, the impact of the pandemic is certainly not unprecedented (Honigsbaum 2020). From a human security perspective, the pandemic exposes the limitations of traditional security thinking. This is demonstrated through two simple arguments. Militarily advanced states entrenched in the traditional security worldview often failed to deal effectively with the Covid-19 challenge, and thus failed the essential security needs of their citizens and their societies. Therefore, states which are characterised as 'strong' from a traditional security perspective – in which military capacity is privileged – did not necessarily cope well with the Covid-19 pandemic in human terms. Moreover, states with a broader view of national security – where expenditure and political priorities are more balanced between military spending and public welfare – have tended to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 more effectively. Despite the evidence being anecdotal, it is adequate to support these broad observations.

Many political leaders have invoked the language and metaphors of traditional security thinking in framing their response to Covid-19 (Kuteleva and Clifford 2021). Yet some of the most 'advanced' states, measured by traditional military security capacity, were ill-prepared to address the challenge. In fact, there is a rough anecdotal correlation between higher military expenditure and ill-preparedness. Some of the states with the largest per GDP expenditure on military capacity – such as the US, UK, Brazil, France and Russia (SIPRI 2020) – experienced difficulties related to basic healthcare provision and in terms of the broader societal impact of the Covid-19 infection and death rates. Where such societies – for example, the US – combine a strong military tradition with a low public welfare provision, the paradox is particularly stark. Despite having an annual military budget of $649 billion (3.2% of GDP) in 2018, the US had a severe shortage of intensive care equipment in response to Covid-19 (Maani and Galea 2020; Mareiniss 2020). Although the US has the largest per capita healthcare expenditure in the world, a substantial amount of this is funded through private healthcare insurance, and thus not publicly financed. As a result, according to official figures, 8.5% of people (27.5 million), did not have health insurance of any kind in 2018, an increase from 2017 when 7.9% (25.6 million) were uninsured (Berchick, Barnett, and Upton 2019). Some commentators (Marmot 2016; Rosenthal 2017) have argued that the state of American healthcare is more imperiled and unequal than even these numbers suggest, which provides important context for understanding the impact of Covid-19 in that country. Of course, countries were not uniformly exposed to Covid-19, and a multitude of factors explain how and why societies experienced and coped with the virus differently; the simple point here is that advanced military capacity – as a key measure of national security traditionally defined and of a 'strong state' – could not assure an effective response to

this public health emergency, and this raises questions about political priorities around 'security'.

Although global health spending has been increasing in absolute terms in recent decades and is projected to continue to do so (Global Burden of Disease Health Financing Collaborator Network 2019), "governments are not yet making health a high enough priority, as measured by the proportion of all government spending devoted to the health sector" (BMJ 2019). In contrast, according to SIPRI analysis (Tian et al. 2020), global military expenditure saw its largest annual increase in a decade, reaching \$1917 billion (2.2% of global GDP) in 2019. Thus, while the militarily most advanced countries could maintain relatively very high material investment in the apparatus of hard security and fund military interventions in multiple conflict-areas around the world, they experienced severe shortages of medical facilities and personal protection equipment during the pandemic, and the effectiveness of their responses – measured by infections or mortality rates – were comparatively poor.

The "nationwide public health catastrophe" in the US (Lancet 2020) exposed a broader vulnerability and a mismatch between public expenditure in support of military pre-eminence and the vulnerability to health challenges. More US citizens died as a result of Covid-19 than in the US's major armed conflicts since the beginning of the 20th Century combined, including the Second World War. This is significant given that the US is the quintessentially 'powerful' state by traditional security measures. The number is vastly more than are killed by terrorism, despite the political attention given to this as an 'existential' threat. The UK's lack of preparedness and its record in terms of infections and mortality rates – both absolute and relative to population – is a further case in point. In both countries, military prowess and the capacity to reach a very high level of security traditionally defined is starkly juxtaposed against a weak performance against Covid-19.

In both countries, as well, the pandemic was not a completely unanticipated challenge; the threat of potential epidemics has been firmly on the policy radar for a decade or more. National strategic planning (for example, HM Government 2018; US Department of State/US Agency for International Development 2018) has internalised public health challenges as a security threat, and the Global Health Security Agenda – involving 67 countries, international organisations, NGOs and companies – has for some time been working "to advance a world safe and secure from infectious disease threats". But it is instructive that the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review of 2015 (HM Government 2015, 68) indicated that the country would

> invest in new, large-scale research and development to combat the world's deadliest diseases. These include diseases with epidemic potential and those which affect the lives and livelihoods of millions in developing countries, building on the UK's major commitment to tackle malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

Presumably, the association between epidemics and 'developing countries' suggests that strategic planners could not foresee the threat to the security and prosperity of 'developed' countries. This also suggests, despite the rhetorical commitment to public health, that the UK and the US had not elevated this challenge in relation to traditional

security priorities. 'Security' is thus conceived in narrow, traditional terms despite the rhetorical widening of the security discourse.

In contrast, some states with a lower military expenditure as a proportion of GDP (SIPRI 2020), or a higher per capita expenditure on public health, managed the Covid-19 challenge better, by any measure of effectiveness. Some Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and New Zealand, for example, which have comparatively high proportions of hospital beds and doctors per capita and public commitment to public healthcare systems, managed the Covid-19 challenge more effectively, when comparing data on healthcare systems (OECD 2020a, 2020b) and the impact of the pandemic (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities 2020). Clearly, none of these countries neglects traditional security capacity, but many of them balance this with a greater attention to and investment in public health and welfare.

Military preparedness and relative strength – a key measure of security and state capacity according to traditional thinking – did not positively correlate to effectiveness in being prepared for, or addressing, the Covid-19 coronavirus. This is a reflection of a broader fact in many countries: public health challenges represent a far more acute threat to life and livelihood than traditional security challenges, yet public expenditure and the political centre of gravity do not follow this logic. This is most starkly demonstrated by public health inequalities; for example, in the US, the life expectancy of the most affluent population exceeds that of the poorest by 10–15 years (Dickman, Himmelstein, and Woolhandler 2017). This means that the fundamental healthcare needs of a very significant deprived proportion of the uninsured US population is not served by its national security preoccupation and its commitment to military pre-eminence. States with the most advanced militaries – and thus the most 'secure' according to the national security model – have been unprepared for, and unable to respond to, the Covid-19 pandemic. This goes far beyond the direct medical impacts of Covid-19; severe economic breakdown has had an enormous impact upon the economic strength of some countries, and will have long-term consequences (Chen et al. 2020). Through the experience of Covid-19, therefore, human security exposes the limitations of the traditional national security paradigm when the measure of success relates to the fundamental welfare of individuals and communities. It also challenges the idea of discrete sectors or realms of security since national security cannot in reality be divorced from the public health of the population, and the international/domestic dichotomy becomes redundant.

A critical human security perspective

From a mainstream human security perspective the Covid-19 crisis demonstrates the disconnect between conventional security approaches and societal wellbeing, when measured by human welfare. Simply put, there was not a positive relationship between traditional security capacity and effectiveness in responding to the pandemic. There is, of course, no reason why superior hard security capacity should obstruct a state's management of Covid-19, but the record confirms that many militarily strong states did not cope well. States associated with a heightened national security model – measured by military expenditure – were often less resilient, or no more resilient, than states with a lower military expenditure as a proportion of GDP. Given the manner in which states generally essentialise and champion the role of military power in the provision of

security, this is problematic. Beyond this, a more critical approach to human security provides further insights.

Critical Human Security Studies explores the values and institutions which exist as they relate to human welfare, with a primary focus upon underlying sources of insecurity (Newman 2010). Critical approaches thus expose and challenge the structural conditions which give rise to insecurity and deprivation and highlight the political nature of vulnerability. The added value of human security as a potentially 'critical' project – and something which differentiates it from some other critical security studies approaches – is that this intellectual agenda runs parallel to an attempt to engage with and influence policy practices. From this perspective, it is essential to see the manifestations of insecurity as a reflection of structural inequalities and abuses of power. The impact of Covid-19 – and in particular the social, gendered and racial patterns of this impact – provides a particularly stark picture of security from a critical human security perspective. In this way, a human security approach demonstrates how the impact of Covid-19, far from being new, reflects structurally embedded inequalities which go far beyond the pandemic crisis itself. This impact is, therefore, a reflection of the political nature of security and insecurity – in terms of priorities, costs, risks and access – as they are experienced. Thus, pre-existing, embedded patterns of structural insecurity exacerbated the impact of the pandemic. This can be illustrated in a number of ways, in relation to social inequality, ethnicity, and gender.

A conspicuous pattern in the impact of Covid-19 at the individual level was how it reflected social and economic disparities. For this reason, some scholars have framed the differentiated impact of Covid-19 through a critique of the neoliberal state (Jones and Hameiri 2021; Sparke and Williams 2021). In broader context, some of the most affluent societies with significant inequality gaps – such as the US and the UK – present particularly interesting patterns. In these and many other societies, people in casual, low-paid employment were disproportionately exposed and afflicted (International Labour Organization 2020). Such people were less able to minimise their exposure to the virus – by remaining at home – because they were less likely to have saved, disposable income, they were less able to work from home, and less likely to be able to take advantage of government-sponsored social safety net interventions (The Health Foundation 2020, 2021). Therefore, as long as they were physically allowed to, economically precarious people were essentially compelled – by their economic circumstances – to continue their direct exposure to the illness through their work and contribute to its spread.

Low-income populations are also more likely to live in cramped urban conditions in multi-occupancy dwellings or apartment blocks where social distancing is more difficult (Madden 2020; Raju and Ayeb-Karlsson 2020; United Nations 2020a). Economically disadvantaged people can be physically more vulnerable in a number of ways – for example, by being more likely to be exposed to air pollution, which is directly related to higher likelihood of death (Wu et al. 2020). Where data is available, therefore, it suggests that the preponderance of those who become infected and those who died were disproportionately within the lower-income range. Thus, the UK's Office for National Statistics (2020a), in an age-adjusted survey of Covid-19 related deaths in March and April 2020 linked to spatial patterns of socioeconomic deprivation – covering the first peak of the virus in the UK – found that the rate of deaths involving Covid-19 in the most

deprived areas of England was 55.1 per 100,000 population, compared with 25.3 deaths per 100,000 population in the least deprived areas. In Wales during this period the most deprived areas had a mortality rate involving Covid-19 almost twice as high as the least deprived areas. The patterns were confirmed in a longer-term study on behalf of the UK's Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE 2020b). Similar patterns were found in the US (see Karmakar, Lantz, and Tipirneni 2021; Paremoer et al. 2021).

Beyond the direct physiological effects of Covid-19, the impact upon economically disadvantaged communities tended to be more acute in situations of lockdown. These people were far more likely to become unemployed due to the nature of their work, thus compounding their precariousness and undermining their economic security. In this sense, the huge secondary impacts of Covid-19 over the longer term – in terms of economic deprivation and ill health – has disproportionately affected poorer communities. Globally, according to the International Labour Organization (2020), almost 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy – already economically vulnerable – were most significantly impacted. A World Bank assessment predicted that the virus could push approximately 49 million people into extreme poverty (Sánchez-Páramo 2020), and one of the scenarios produced by a UN University study (Sumner, Hoy, and Ortiz-Juarez 2020) estimated that this number could be up to half a billion as a result of the contraction of economies globally. Longer term, if the impact of Covid-19 undermines the UN Sustainable Development Goal of ending poverty by 2030, this impact would be felt most acutely by individuals and communities who were already economically impoverished and precarious. Thus, if "Covid-19 is hitting hard an already weak and fragile world economy" (United Nations 2020c), it is the already economically poor individuals and communities who suffer the most (see also Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities 2020). Again, this is not a novel phenomenon – economic shocks periodically occur – and it exposes the growing inequality within and between societies which is rooted in structural factors (OECD 2015; World Inequality Report 2018; UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs 2020). The impact of the 2008 financial crisis is instructive in this regard, measured by impoverishment (Otker-Robe and Podpiera 2013), increased rates of suicide (Chang et al. 2013), and other indicators.

A further pattern in the direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19 which is highlighted from a human security perspective relates to ethnic and racial minorities. Data indicates that a very disproportionate number of deaths in the US and UK involving Covid-19 have been amongst people in this demographic category (Katikireddi et al. 2021; Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2020; Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre 2020). UK data on Covid-19-related deaths by ethnic group in England and Wales between 2 March 2020 and 10 April 2020 indicated that – with age taken into account – black males were 4.2 times more likely to die from a Covid-19-related illness than white males and black females were 4.3 times more likely than white females to die. (Office for National Statistics 2020b). This data also indicated that people of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, and mixed ethnicities in the UK had a significantly raised risk of death involving Covid-19. At one level this is a further reflection of the economic inequalities experienced by minorities (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019), since socio-economic deprivation is closely related to poor health

(Stringhini 2017), and thus vulnerability to the worst effects of Covid-19. (See also SAGE 2020a; The Health Foundation 2020, 2021.)

Disproportionate numbers of ethnic and racial minorities are employed in insecure, low-paid, casual employment (Longhi and Brynin 2017; Cooper 2018). Disproportionate numbers do not have medical insurance in the US (Sohn 2017; Taylor 2019). Disproportionate numbers live in poor, urban settings (UK Government 2019a; UK Government 2019b). Disproportionate numbers are incarcerated (for example, The Lammy Review 2017; Tucker 2017), which has reflected a concentration of infections (Burki 2020). Significant numbers of ethnic and racial minorities in the US and UK are employed in professions – including healthcare, delivery drivers, waste collection – which makes them more exposed to Covid-19. As a result of their economic precariousness, the background health conditions of minorities is generally more likely to be poor (Public Health England 2018), thus increasing the likelihood of having underlying health problems which increase the vulnerability to Covid-19. Again, although this is a conspicuous feature of the epidemiology of Covid-19, it reflects a long-standing pattern of structural social and health inequality in many societies which has been compounded by the impact of Covid-19.

A critical human security perspective also exposes the gendered impact of Covid-19 in multiple ways. Women tend to be physiologically less vulnerable to the worst direct effects of Covid-19 (Wenham, Smith, and Morgan 2020), and thus proportionately under-represented in overall mortality rates (although this is not the case for all countries (Dehingia and Raj 2020)). However, they were disproportionately exposed to the virus through their tendency to dominate in some professions, such as nursing, health and social care (OECD 2020a, 2020b; Wenham, Smith, and Morgan 2020) where women form 70% of the workforce globally (Boniol et al. 2019). They were also disproportionately vulnerable to economic hardship because of their heavy presence in the casual economy, in the context of broader patterns of inequality and discrimination (OECD 2019). Thus, in a number of societies, gendered roles resulted in higher numbers of women being infected (Bertocchi 2020), even if fewer died, in a manner which highlights broader gendered insecurities and inequalities. United Nations (2020b, 2) research has also demonstrated that "Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex".

A further conspicuous pattern was reflected in the evidence that rates of domestic violence – including murder – increased dramatically during the pandemic as (overwhelmingly) women were more exposed to violent partners and relatives during lockdowns and economic downturns, and had fewer options for refuge (Boserup, McKenney, and Elkbuli 2020; Piquero et al. 2021). UN Secretary-General António Guterres (UN News 2020) thus claimed that there was a "horrifying global surge in domestic violence" against women and girls, something described by the Executive Director of UN Women (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020) as a "shadow pandemic". Yet Covid-19 did not highlight a novel phenomenon, since increases in domestic or familial violence have been associated with earlier societal shocks, such as the 2008 financial crisis (True 2010; Mohindra, Labonté, and Spitzer 2011). Rather, Covid-19, both as a result of the confinement of lockdown or the pressures of the economic downturn, exacerbated a widely-experienced daily reality for many women and girls that is highlighted by the human

security approach. In the US, 1 in 4 women are victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2020) and in the UK, almost one in three women aged 16–59 will experience domestic abuse (Office for National Statistics 2019; Refuge 2020). Against this background, the implication that Covid-19 was exceptional in terms of domestic violence is misleading. In this and in broader respects, Covid-19 exposed and magnified perennial, structural insecurities which are fundamentally gendered and which have been explored within gendered and feminist security studies for many years (Tickner 1992; Hudson 2005; Hoogensen and Stuvøy 2006; Sjoberg 2009; Gentry, Shepherd, and Sjoberg 2018).

From a human security perspective, it is important to stress that the direct and indirect physiological and socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 – with reference to race, economic status, and gender – are not new; rather, they highlight existing structural insecurities, abuses and inequalities which must be centred and not marginalised in security analysis. As a further illustration of this, the huge impact of Covid-19 upon worsening food security for millions of people (WFP/Food Security Information Network 2020) is merely reinforcing – and not creating – a predicament that is normal, and worsening, for a significant proportion of the world, even before the pandemic (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2019).

Further human security perspectives on the impact of Covid-19 can be explored in future research. For example, the responses of some governments to Covid-19 has involved repression, control and surveillance (OHCHR 2020). Migrants and forcibly-displaced people are also particularly vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of the virus (Raju and Ayeb-Karlsson 2020; UNHCR 2020). There is evidence that Covid-19 is exacerbating inter-communal and sectarian conflict, in conjunction with other conflict drivers (International Crisis Group 2020). Finally, a critical human security approach exposes how our understanding of 'emergencies' in relation to threats is a condition of power and inequality in global perspective. As indicated earlier, public health emergencies other than Covid-19 have an equally – or far more – devastating impact upon human welfare and livelihoods, but since they tend to be confined to lower-income societies in the Global South, they are not generally regarded as 'global emergencies'. This is a reflection of the embedded exceptionalism of prevailing international security attitudes; issues are only an 'emergency' if they directly threaten powerful, industrialised societies.

Conclusions

The first human security debate, both in policy circles and in academia, is well past the peak of its creativity. Academic disagreements regarding the definition, analytical value and scope of human security have not been resolved, and there is little appetite to resolve these circular debates. Some analysts have attempted to take the human security concept forward theoretically – for example, in the form of a critical approach (Newman 2016) – but the traction of this as a theoretical school has been so far limited. In terms of policy, the initial momentum behind the human security concept has slowed down – or possibly stalled – because some states regard the concept with suspicion, because states are conditioned by structural pressures which encourage traditional security thinking, and because the resurgence in nationalist and realist politics has put pressure on human

rights-based initiatives. Nevertheless, the conspicuous inequalities that have been exposed by Covid-19, and the gap between hard security capacity and everyday experiences of insecurity, suggest that human security provides an important input into the evolving security studies agenda that is not adequately accommodated within the mainstream 'widening' and 'deepening' discourse. The seminal 1994 UNDP report on human security provides a persuasive framework for understanding the impact and implications of Covid-19, with reference to economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (UNDP 1994, 24–33). In turn, the impact of the pandemic and the patterns which are reflected across genders, social status and ethnicity illustrate the intersectionalities at play in the experiences of security and insecurity. As this article has stressed, the political nature of in/security in practice, defined by structural inequalities and ideology, is not unique to the era of Covid-19. The pandemic amplified and compounded – but did not create – these structural dynamics. What may be a new dynamic, however, is the manner in which the pandemic exposed the limitations of the national security paradigm in the world's most powerful states, and the links which exist between traditional conceptions of security and everyday experiences of security.

It is not the objective of this article to securitise Covid-19 in a way that would reinforce exclusionary or competitive national approaches. As others have observed with reference to climate change (Deudney 1990; Diez, Von Lucke, and Wellmann 2016; Warner and Boas 2019), securitising challenges may bring resources and political attention, but it can also bring negative consequences. Anecdotal evidence of the securitisation of Covid-19 certainly supports a critical view in terms of government responses (Liu and Bennett 2020; Stott, West, and Harrison 2020; Amnesty International 2021; Bueno de Mesquita, Kapilashrami, and Meier 2021; Hapal 2021; Kuteleva and Clifford 2021), including in terms of the use of Covid-19 as a pretext for exclusion of migrants and refugees (Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020; Libal et al. 2021; Meer et al. 2021). Yet some urgent challenges arguably do merit being treated as and responded to as security challenges, in a proportionate and accountable manner (Floyd 2019). The time is ripe for a second generation of human security debates, because the concept brings added value by demonstrating interconnections between security challenges and the importance of justice in mitigating them, and it provides policy implications. In broad perspective, the international human rights movement – and the multilateral apparatus that is essential to promote it – are under threat in a transitional international order defined by resurgent geopolitical conflict. The core message of human security is to promote human-centred security practices, and this is a fundamentally important agenda, whether or not it is pursued under the 'human security' label. The Covid-19 pandemic underscores this, but from a human security perspective, the impact of Covid-19 is not unprecedented; it exacerbates and exposes existing structural insecurities.

The national security paradigm continues to fail many individuals and communities because it is embedded in a worldview which privileges certain values above the needs and interests of individuals. This is demonstrated by the manner in which many societies – including the most materially powerful states – have suffered both in terms of health impact as well as their economies. Because Covid-19 has had such an impact even upon states with the most advanced institutional capacity, it raises questions of efficacy in resource allocation, the prioritisation of needs, and the political nature of

security. Public health – but also ecological integrity, nutrition, and other basic tenets of individual wellbeing – cannot be simply regarded as add-ons in the widening security agenda. This raises a key question: will the experience of Covid-19, exposing as it has the limitations of traditional security in relation to the everyday needs of people, encourage a paradigm change in how security is conceptualised and practiced? If a far more fundamental existential threat – climate change – has arguably failed to bring about such a shift, can Covid-19 do so?

From the perspective of academic security studies, debates related to human security should go beyond the positivist fixation upon – and critique of – the fluid definition and analytical imprecision of the concept, which undermined its traction in the past. The value of human security as a concept does not come from its role as a dependent variable, but rather as a normative compass in favour of the everyday experiences of insecurity and deprivation, in which arguments may sometimes be heuristic. In this context, the normative value of human security as a framework for understanding the impact of Covid-19 is compelling, and this provides a case for revisiting human security more broadly as a tool for understanding and contesting questions of security and insecurity in domestic and international society. From a critical human security perspective Covid-19 demonstrates the structural nature of inequalities reflected in how security and insecurity are experienced, and who pays for the trade-offs that are made in addressing public health crises. It demonstrates that security, in many societies, is not a public good to be equally enjoyed, and that the decisions which shape experiences of security and insecurity are deeply political and shaped by power.

In addition to the ethical issues which this raises, a human security approach also points to the empirical interconnections which exist between different security realms. The economies which underpin the 'national security' of the most powerful states are only as resilient as the workforces which service them, and when that workforce is vulnerable, precarious and uninsured, it exposes a weakness in traditional assumptions about state power and security capacity. Academic security studies are likely to reflect this more in the future through a renewed interest in how the mutually dependent security spheres intersect. A key part of this agenda will be to understand the largely hidden costs and trade-offs of traditional security in human terms.

A renewed human security agenda is called for despite – or indeed because of – the resurgence of traditional security concerns in a transitional international order characterised by inter-state rivalry, nationalism and a fraying of the rules-based international order. In terms of encouraging a shift in policy practice, the initial indications are not positive. Traditional international mechanisms for managing security challenges – such as the UN Security Council – have not responded effectively (Lynch 2020). International initiatives such as the Global Health Security Agenda, launched in 2014, are an important part of preparedness, but more important is national commitment to redress a more deeply embedded structural imbalance in favour of traditional national security, in particular when that results in individual vulnerabilities to more everyday harms. The responses of many powerful countries to the Covid-19 pandemic were characterised by exclusionary, national approaches and heightened inter-state antagonism. This is a demonstration of a perennial tendency in international security, where state elites are embedded in the structural sources of insecurity – whatever definition is used – and therefore, cannot be expected to lead reform. Nevertheless, a few early

indications provide some hope that Covid-19 may encourage a more progressive, more human-oriented approach to security. Firstly, the virus exposed a range of structural deprivations and societal vulnerabilities – in both affluent and deprived societies – that can lead to major economic disruption as well as human misery. The economic impact of Covid-19 – unlike climate change – cannot be ignored by even the staunchest adherents of the narrow traditional security paradigm or the free market society. Public health, as a human security concern, demands greater attention and resources not only because this is a crucial to reinforce the integrity of national communities, but also because it is ethically compelling from a human rights perspective. This argument may gain momentum as a result of Covid-19.

Secondly, a shift towards a broader conception of security may be encouraged by future analysis of which societies proved to be more resilient towards Covid-19. The states which appeared to have responded well to the Covid-19 challenge tended to be those which have significant state investment in public infrastructure rather than free-wheeling free markets or a preoccupation with a national security model. Some observers (Anderlini 2020) also noted "how female leaders at national and regional levels have been the first to take proactive, preventive measures, with compassion and empathy" (see also True 2020). The policy lessons are clear: greater investment in public health, welfare and public goods are generally just as important for both human and traditional security than investment in the accoutrements of military hard power and the accumulation of private capital. Although this is not a new message, it has arguably become more compelling as Covid-19 demonstrates that human security and the bases of traditional security cannot be separated.

Disclosure statement

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