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Collective rumination: When "problem talk" impairs organizational resilience

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Abstract

When adversity strikes, organization members often turn to others in order to vent their negative emotions and receive social support. While social interaction is commonly seen as a major resource for organizational resilience, dysfunctional social interactions and their negative effects on coping with and overcoming adversity are less well understood. This conceptual article develops theory on collective rumination—defined as repetitive and prolonged discussions of adverse events that center on the negative and uncontrollable aspects of the situation—and its detrimental effects on organizational resilience. We elaborate that collective rumination emerges through a vicious circle of a shared negative situational assessment and mutual contagion with highly negative emotions. Based on our theorizing, we propose that collective rumination is negatively related to three core dimensions of organizational resilience: perceptions of control, commitment to joint action, and the acceptance of adversity as a challenge. With our conceptual article, we answer earlier calls to theorize about forms of social interactions that are not valuable but destructive for organizational resilience and elucidate previously neglected social dynamics that are dysfunctional for recovering from adversity.

Kristin Knipfer and Barbara Kump have equally contributed to this research and are listed in alphabetical order.

INTRODUCTION

Adverse situations, such as goal setbacks and routine breakdowns, are common in organizational life (Fisher et al., 2019; Tarba et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017). When adversity strikes, organizational resilience—the process by which an organization uses its capability to positively adjust and maintain functioning prior to, during, and following adversity (Williams et al., 2017; see also Kahn et al., 2018; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003)—is needed to cope with the situation and emerge better prepared for the future (Brueller et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2020; Tarba et al., 2019). Organizational resilience can be increased by social sharing of negative feelings and thoughts related to the adverse situation (Barton & Kahn, 2019) because social sharing can help alleviate negative emotions (Brans et al., 2014; Carmeli et al., 2016; Kahn, 2001; Nils & Rimé, 2012; Stephens et al., 2013; Van der Vegt et al., 2015) and provide social support (Cooke et al., 2019; Lamb & Cogan, 2016). In supportive conversations, negative emotions can be "defused and processed" within the group such that its members are better able to engage in "the coordinative work of resilience" (Barton & Kahn, 2019, p. 1424).

However, we argue that sharing negative thoughts and emotions among organization members can also *undermine* organizational resilience. In the context of the global COVID-19 crisis, many of us have experienced lengthy conversations that were highly negative, revolving around worst-case scenarios, and focusing on aspects beyond control. While social sharing is a typical response to adversity (Haggard et al., 2011), which may provide short-term emotional relief (Brans et al., 2014) and evoke a feeling of closeness (Barton & Kahn, 2019), such conversations can foster a shared negative situational assessment and amplify negative emotions. A spiral of negative thoughts and emotions may develop that depletes organization members' cognitive and emotional resources. Yet, the potential negative effects of such "problem talk" on organizational resilience are a blind spot in research: Only a few studies have examined the effects of negative conversations for individuals (e.g., Behfar et al., 2019) and groups (e.g., Marmenout, 2011), and their outcomes for organizations have been neglected until now.

In the present paper, we aim to shed light on this blind spot by developing theory on *collective rumination*. Following Marmenout (2011, p. 799), in collective rumination, organization members, who are all affected by the adverse situation and contribute their thoughts and emotions to the discussion, are "repetitively and passively discussing organizational problems and their negative consequences with a group of peers." Although research on collective rumination is scant, findings from related areas imply that more than 40% of organization members frequently have ruminative thoughts about adverse aspects of their work (Kinnunen et al., 2017) and vent their negative emotions about four to five times a day toward others (Behfar et al., 2019). Indeed, four out of five individuals believe that talking helps to deal with problems (Baer et al., 2018). Hence, it is likely that collective rumination is a common response to adversity.

In this article, we will theorize on the underlying dynamics of collective rumination in the face of adversity (Propositions 1 and 2) and outline how it will diminish organizational resilience (Propositions 3 and 4). As our main contribution, we introduce the concept of collective rumination to organizational resilience research. While we agree that social interactions provide social support and foster a feeling of closeness (Barton & Kahn, 2019; Brueller et al., 2019; Haggard et al., 2011;

Kahn, 2001; Stephens et al., 2013; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003), we challenge the common and intuitive assumption that "talking helps" for coping with and overcoming adversity. Instead, we argue that the feeling of closeness serves as a positive reinforcement of "problem talk," leading to an immersion in negative thoughts and emotions. Our core argument is that social sharing—in the shape of collective rumination—can be dysfunctional for overcoming adverse situations. We thereby answer calls to theorize on social interactions that are *not* valuable for resilience (Tarba et al., 2017) and to elucidate how group phenomena impact resilience (Hartmann et al., 2020).

We begin our conceptual analysis with an overview of research on organizational resilience, summarizing arguments as to why social interactions can be a resource for coping with an adverse situation. We then introduce collective rumination, describe its characteristics, elaborate on its emergence, and theorize about its social dynamics. Based on Brueller et al.'s (2019) argument that resilience entails *control*, *commitment*, and *challenge*, we outline the severe negative effects of collective rumination and discuss implications of our work.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Resilience in organizations has been at the center of attention of management scholars for decades (for reviews see Fisher et al., 2019; King et al., 2016; Linnenluecke, 2017). In the face of today's environmental and societal challenges and the disruptive nature of modern business environments (Williams et al., 2017), it has recently gained renewed interest (Fisher et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2020; Tarba et al., 2017). As a current example, the global COVID-19 crisis brings us all face to face with what happens when adversity strikes, ranging from minor issues, such as annoying videoconferences due to unstable Internet connections, to larger problems, such as closed production halls. Organizational resilience is a fundamental process to overcome such adversities or emerge even stronger from them.

Characteristics of organizational resilience

Organizational resilience enables organizations to cope with, adapt to, and thrive despite adversities (Brueller et al., 2019; Duchek, 2020; Kahn et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2017). While earlier research viewed organizational resilience as "bouncing back" to baseline performance, we subscribe to recent perspectives that organizations may emerge from adversity more resourceful than before (Duchek, 2020; Stephens et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2017). Thereby, organizational resilience is a social process, involving various practices that "allow members to mindfully engage with one another, drawing on collective resources in crafting adaptive responses" to an adverse situation (Barton & Kahn, 2019, p. 1040). Counteracting and recovering from adversity includes "understanding, responding to, and absorbing variations; maintaining, gaining back, and/or building new resources" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 742). It requires communication and coordinated action of multiple organizational members in their different roles (e.g., human resources, controlling, sales) and within existing decision structures (Brueller et al., 2019; Kahn et al., 2018). Typically, not all parts of the organization are equally affected by adversity; still, different parts of the organization need to interact to cope with it, to maintain functioning, or to grow from the experience (Barton & Kahn, 2019; see also Stoverink et al., 2020). Thus, their joint action influences how resilient the organization is as a whole (Kahn et al., 2018).

Brueller et al. (2019) identified three antecedents of resilience—control, commitment, and challenge—all of which enable proactive coping with adversity. Concerning *control*, organization members need to believe that they can influence the situation for the better (Brueller et al., 2019). If

they feel that they have control over the adverse situation, they show more persistence and effort in searching for opportunities to act and are optimistic that they can improve the situation (Parker et al., 2010; Stoverink et al., 2020). They will invest more time and effort in looking at a problem from different perspectives and explore different explanations for it (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). In contrast, Brueller et al. (2019) found that threats to perceptions of control can deter a functional response to an adverse situation.

As the second antecedent of organizational resilience, organization members need to show *commitment* to act in the interest of the organization; they must be able and willing to voice ideas on how to jointly overcome adversity (Brueller et al., 2019). Commitment is positively related to psychological ownership and initiative for improving the situation (Parker et al., 2010). It is also an important prerequisite for "proactive coping" with stressful events (Crant, 2000, p. 452): Only if they have commitment to the organization, organization members engage in proactive behavior, that is, "self-directed action to anticipate or initiate change in the work system or work roles" (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009, p. 95). In contrast, low commitment was found to reduce the initiative to act upon a problem and may even result in intentions to leave the organization (Brueller et al., 2019).

Third, organization members need to accept the situation as a *challenge*—as an opportunity to adapt existing structures or processes (Brueller et al., 2019). When they experience adversity as an opportunity, organization members aim for true transformation of the organization by challenging the status quo and creating more favorable conditions (Crant, 2000). This also involves creativity and innovation: Organization members may think outside the box, play around with ideas, and create new solutions through a process of creative synthesis (e.g., Harvey, 2014; Zhou et al., 2008). In contrast, when they perceive adversity as a "major hurdle" (Brueller et al., 2019), this will diminish organization members' capacity to find creative solutions.

The role of social interactions in organizational resilience

Organizational resilience builds on organization members' relationships (Barton & Kahn, 2019; Fisher et al., 2019; Kahn et al., 2018); accordingly, theoretical models of resilience highlight the role of social interactions in coping with and overcoming adversity (Carmeli et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2019; Kahn, 2001; Stephens et al., 2013; Weick et al., 2005). Importantly, these social interactions should include attending to negative emotions; only then, "group members integrate the full complexity of their human experience and that of their colleagues, shaping functional relational patterns and charting an effective course through adversity" (Barton & Kahn, 2018, p. 1426).

In fact, negative emotions play a crucial role in the context of resilience as they may foster both, problem identification and information processing (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Maitlis et al., 2013). First, regarding problem identification, they can signal a problem that needs to be addressed, an "itch that wants scratching" (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 106). Negative emotions direct attention to unexpected or adverse events and generate situational awareness; they may interrupt automatic and habitual behavior and elicit a more "involved-deliberate" way of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Second, regarding information processing, negative emotions were shown to increase the motivation to learn and overcome an adverse situation (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Zhao, 2011) and are associated with increased effort and persistence to process information as well as greater depth and length of elaboration of this information (De Dreu et al., 2008). In summary, they can promote mindful and reflective processing (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, to deal with them constructively, organization members need to reduce strong negative emotions to moderate to low levels of intensity (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Zhao, 2011)—and one way

to do so is by sharing them with others. Social relationships can serve as a holding environment (Kahn, 2001) that allows to openly share fear, anxiety, and uncertainty and to jointly make sense of the situation (Carmeli et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2013). Hence, social interactions can provide both *emotional relief* (Haggard et al., 2011; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) and *social support* (Cooke et al., 2019). Emotional relief is "a temporary and specific alleviation of emotional distress" (Brans et al., 2014, p. 1063) which does not necessarily lead to permanent emotional recovery from adversity. Social support is "the assistance received or the feeling of attachment from an interpersonal relationship that is perceived as supportive, caring, or loving" (Baranik et al., 2017, p. 1264; based on Hobfoll & Stokes, 1988).

Barton and Kahn's (2019) core assumption is that talking about negative thoughts and emotions can reveal a pleasant feeling of closeness: Organization members may feel strongly connected through the shared experience of adversity. That way, strain and the related negative emotions can be "defused and processed" by the group, relieving individual organization members from carrying the strain alone (Barton & Kahn, 2019, p. 1420). If organization members attend to their fears and anxieties and show mutual compassion in their conversations (Barton & Kahn, 2019; Carmeli et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2013), they may also be able to alleviate their negative emotions better and find ways to overcome an adverse situation together. When openly attending to their negative emotions, "members are better able to step back and consider how they got to this point" (Barton & Kahn, 2019, p. 1420). By talking about the adverse situation, they may shift to higher-order cognitive processing and jointly make sense of it (Weick et al., 2005).

In summary, the predominant view in the literature is that attending to and sharing negative thoughts and emotions is *beneficial* for organizational resilience. For instance, Barton and Kahn (2019, p. 1416) recommended *relational pauses* where "group members reflect on emotional and relational aspects of difficult situations". In contrast, in this paper, we argue that *too much* attention to negative aspects of the situation is detrimental, too. We suggest that organization members can get immersed in overly negative discussions up to a point where they are unable to cope with and overcome adversity. In the following, we introduce collective rumination as a dysfunctional pattern of social interaction that is characterized by such high levels of negativity.

THE CONCEPT OF COLLECTIVE RUMINATION

The term *collective rumination* was first mentioned by Marmenout (2011). She found in a laboratory experiment that organization members, who were informed about a (fictional) change initiative, would discuss that initiative excessively; their conversations centered on negative and uncontrollable aspects, involved speculations about worst case scenarios and manifold downsides of this initiative, and reinforced their concerns and anxiety, "causing the entire group's morale to decrease" (Marmenout, 2011, p. 87). Building on Marmenout's work, we define collective rumination as *repetitive and excessive discussions of adverse situations amongst organization members that center on negative and uncontrollable aspects*.

While individual rumination is an intra-psychic process, collective rumination is a form of conversation, where organization members verbally and non-verbally share their thoughts and emotions about an adverse situation. Because it is repetitive and excessive, collective rumination goes beyond social sharing (Brans et al., 2014). Unlike a situation of co-rumination, where one person ruminates about a personal problem and an uninvolved person is listening (Affifi et al., 2013; Haggard et al., 2011), in collective rumination, all interlocutors are affected by the adverse situation and share their thoughts and emotions with each other. Collective rumination is not necessarily bound to formal groups, such as work teams, but may span hierarchical levels or organizational units. Moreover, the

term "collective" does not necessarily imply a large number of people; instead, it is used to indicate that two or more organization members—who are interdependent in their social interactions and act as a "collective" (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999)—ruminate *together*.

While individual rumination has received much attention, only few have examined rumination as a *social* phenomenon. They have mostly investigated dyadic conversations, where individuals complained about their supervisor (Baer et al., 2018), vented their negative emotions to a close friend (Boren, 2014), or blamed others for their problems (Tjosvold et al., 2004). It was shown that co-rumination can provide people with social support and strengthen personal relationships (Haggard et al., 2011). At the same time, however, it was associated with more individual rumination after the conversation (Afifi et al., 2013). While these authors explored the effects on the ruminator, the social dynamics between multiple ruminators were not investigated. This is an important limitation as, in organizational reality, adversity likely affects the entire organization or larger parts of it; hence, multiple organization members are equally affected and thus will not be "neutral listeners" anymore. With our conceptual analysis, we address this limitation and theorize on the emergence and social dynamics of collective rumination as a *collective* response to adversity. Figure 1 summarizes our key arguments and propositions.

THE EMERGENCE OF COLLECTIVE RUMINATION

We understand collective rumination as a pattern of social interaction that emerges as an attempt to cope with an adverse, stressful situation by turning toward others. Adverse situations elicit highly negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, fear, or anxiety, and organization members typically approach others under threatening conditions in order to re-gain control over the adverse situation (Fisher et al., 2019).
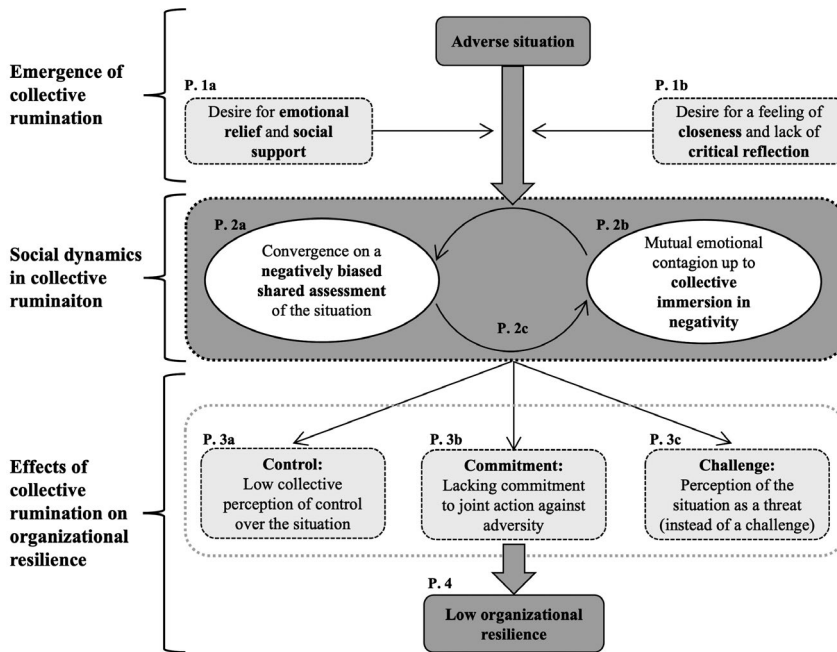

FIGURE 1 The emergence and social dynamics of collective rumination and its effects on organizational resilience in the face of adversity

In line with our argument, Marmenout (2011) was able to observe how collective rumination emerges in her lab experiment: In their first reaction to the announcement of a fictional merger, 14 out of 16 groups started to express fear and uncertainty toward others; they explicated great skepticism about the change and started to speculate about potential layoffs. Organizational research on related phenomena such as venting and blaming (Behfar et al., 2019; Boren, 2014) and co-rumination (Afifi et al., 2013; Baranik et al., 2017; Haggard et al., 2011) confirms the assumption that individuals talk to others in stressful situations as one way to cope with the situation. Especially when they are frustrated, dissatisfied, or dysphoric (Kowalski, 1996) or when they feel treated in an unfair manner (Baer et al., 2018), they tend to vent their anger or anxiety in conversations with their peers. They aim to get rid of their negative emotions through the explication of their worries toward each other (Nils & Rimé, 2012; Shepherd & Cardon, 2009; Shepherd et al., 2011) and seek for social support (Baranik et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2005; Maitlis et al., 2013). Hence, we propose:

Proposition 1a   Collective rumination is triggered by organization members' need for emotional relief and social support.

Sharing negative thoughts and emotions with others, who are also affected by the adverse situation, may help organization members understand the situation, its causes and likely consequences (Barton & Kahn, 2019). They may find meaning together by articulating their thoughts toward others and by "probing" their views on why an adverse situation had occurred. They may develop creative solutions to the problem at hand (Carmeli et al., 2016; Holmqvist, 2003) or detect ways to proactively shape the situation to create more favorable conditions (Dahlin et al., 2018; Knipfer et al., 2013).

However, they can only overcome the situation, if they manage to critically reflect on the situation (Knipfer et al., 2013) and search for potential solutions (Roese & Epstude, 2017). While sharing negative emotions may foster a feeling of closeness and create a sense that "we are all in this together" (Barton & Kahn, 2019), this pleasant feeling can be problematic as it may serve as a positive reinforcement to share negative thoughts and vent negative emotions again: "Members who might otherwise be reluctant to share are reassured and bolstered by demonstrations of genuine compassion" (Barton & Kahn, 2019, p. 1418). In other words, the feeling of closeness may encourage others to join the negative conversation rather than seek constructive perspectives about the problem at hand (as suggested by Behfar et al., 2019). Hence, there is the risk that other organization members may also start sharing their negative interpretations and experiences, thereby paving the way for collective rumination to unfold and be maintained over time. If not challenged, negative interpretations of the situation may become amplified (Baer et al., 2018; Boren, 2014; Brown et al., 2005) rather than being challenged through social sharing. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 1b   Collective rumination is perpetuated by a desire for a feeling of closeness and a lack of critical reflection.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN COLLECTIVE RUMINATION

Although Marmenout's (2011) protocols are not detailed enough to discover the social dynamics of collective rumination, they suggest a rapid convergence on a negative situational assessment and immersion in high negativity. In line with these observations and further studies on co-rumination (Baranik et al., 2017; Haggard et al., 2011), we make the refined argument that collective rumination involves (a) rapid convergence on a shared negative situational assessment and (b) mutual contagion

of negative emotions up to immersion in negativity. Both mechanisms (c) reinforce each other in a vicious circle that can hardly be interrupted.

Rapid convergence on a shared negative situational assessment

Marmenout (2011) observed that change recipients mostly speculated about worst-case scenarios and focused on potential negative consequences of decisions taken by the top management team. This suggests that collective rumination includes elements of *complaining*, that is, explaining one's dissatisfaction with a situation to others (Kowalski, 1996), and of *blaming*, that is, attributing failure and mistakes to others (e.g., to supervisors; Tennen & Affleck, 1990). Hearing others' negative statements may trigger off negative thoughts on the part of the listeners too (Vince & Saleem, 2004). Thus, there is the risk that listeners, who are affected by the same situation, start to complain themselves, fueling contagious spirals of venting and complaining (Kowalski, 1996). Like positive statements of one individual elicit positive statements made by others (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2011), negative statements are likely to elicit more negative statements by others, reinforcing negativity in the conversation. Similar observations were made by Kauffeld and Meyers (2009) who found patterns of complaining–supporting–complaining statements in meetings.

Moreover, in collective rumination, organization members do not challenge negative interpretations of others but reinforce them on the collective level. Ruminators support each other's negative views of the situation, mutually encourage their problem talk, confirm themselves in their negative emotions, and develop differentiated worst-case scenarios of what ought to happen next (Marmenout, 2011). This is partly because all affected organization members will develop similarly negative assessments of the situation, because being part of the same organization provides the same context for the interpretation of an event (Harris, 1994; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Hence, they will hardly be able to provide more constructive perspectives on the situation. Moreover, "venters" tend to approach those who are not challenging their negative interpretations but confirm their assessments (Behfar et al., 2019). Thus, collective rumination may emerge in groups that are characterized by supportive rather than critically reflective discussions. In such conversations, voicing alternative opinions ("the situation is not that bad after all") may threaten the feeling of closeness and, therefore, organization members will talk about mostly negative aspects of the situation in order not to be expelled. While this may further increase closeness (Barton & Kahn, 2019; Kahn, 2001), it results in over-commitment to negative interpretations and cognitive lock-ins.

Taken together, if a conversation focuses on negatively biased interpretations and, at the same time, the collective fails to seek and discuss divergent opinions, this will lead to a rapid convergence of individual interpretations on a shared negative interpretation—a bottom-up mechanism through which individual processing shifts to collective processing (Dionne et al., 2010). Conclusively, we suggest:

> *Proposition 2a* In collective rumination, venting and complaining will propel organization members toward a shared negative situational assessment of an adverse situation.

Mutual emotional contagion up to immersion in negativity

As outlined above, organization members turn to others in order to gain emotional relief (Baer et al., 2018; Barton & Kahn, 2019; Kowalski, 1996; Nils & Rimé, 2012). In their conversations with others, they may show various sorts of "distress signals," including explicit acknowledgment of emotions

("I am worried that…") or non-verbal reactions such as eye-rolling or slamming one's hand down the table (Barton & Kahn, 2019). Sharing negative emotions with others may be functional if the collective manages to take strain from individuals and reduce the negative emotions to an extent where organization members can step back and make sense of the situation. In a dyadic setting, this requires that the listener challenges the negative perception and pinpoints positive sides of the situation (Behfar et al., 2019). If *not* challenged, there is a high risk that negative emotions become amplified through their articulation (Baer et al., 2018; Boren, 2014; Brown et al., 2005). Then, social sharing is a dysfunctional attempt to cope with adversity, because it may even increase negative emotions (Rosen et al., 2021). Relatedly, Baer et al. (2018) found that talking about unfair supervisor behavior increased anger rather than reducing it.

This may happen in collective rumination, as there are no "neutral, uninvolved listeners" who could challenge the negative perception of a situation: All involved ruminators are affected by the same adverse situation and thus may show similar emotional reactions. Moreover, others' negative statements may leverage the listeners' own emotional reactions to the situation (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and fuel feelings of dysphoria and dissatisfaction (Fischer et al., 2004; Kowalski, 1996). In line with that argument, previous research has provided extant evidence for a spillover effect of negative affect (Barsade, 2002; Totterdell et al., 1998) and for mutual contagion and emotional extension on the group level (Anderson et al., 2003; Hatfield et al., 1993; Van Kleef & Fischer, 2016; Menges & Kilduff, 2015). Eventually, the collective becomes more and more immersed in highly negative emotions. Taken together, we suggest:

Proposition 2b In collective rumination, mutual emotional contagion and emotional extension on the group level will lead to immersion in highly negative emotions.

A vicious circle of negative situational assessment and emotional immersion

The two mechanisms of collective rumination, convergence on a shared negative situational assessment and mutual emotional contagion, reinforce each other: Negative situational assessments intensify negative emotions, and negative emotions will bias cognitive processing once more (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Ford et al., 2017; Maitlis et al., 2013). Hence, collective rumination is characterized by a vicious circle of negative thinking and immersion in highly negative emotions. It revivifies and preserves a stressful situation so that organization members will experience the stressor again and again, diminishing their capability to cope with it (Brosschot et al., 2006; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

Once organization members engage in collective rumination, a shift to more functional social interactions is unlikely to occur; it requires that someone recognize the dysfunctional character of the conversation and call for a more reflective account (Barton & Kahn, 2019). However, if ruminators do not recognize that they are lost in vicious cycles of negatively biased thinking and negative emotions, they will have difficulties switching to a more constructive form of conversation: "(R)uminators ruminate precisely because they are unable to make sense of a recent experience to their satisfaction, whereas non-ruminators more effectively figure out what they need to learn and then stop suffering" (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 186; see also Koster et al., 2011). Likewise, as we have argued, collective rumination is self-perpetuating—it does not lead to emotional relief but results in high consensus about the shared negative situational assessment and negativity of the adverse situation.

Paradoxically, organization members ruminating together invest a lot of effort in attempts to cope with the adverse situation without improving it. Although sharing negative emotions increases the feeling of closeness, which can be a resource of resilience (Barton & Kahn, 2019), collective

rumination will lead to an accumulation of load reactions (Perko et al., 2017; Vahle-Hinz et al., 2017) and a cycle of resource loss, which depletes cognitive and emotional resources; this impairs their capacity to cope with and overcome a stressful situation (van Seggelen-Damen & van Dam, 2016). In conclusion, we suggest:

> *Proposition 2c*   In collective rumination, the vicious circle of a negative situational assessment and immersion in negativity depletes organization members' cognitive and emotional resources to deal with the adverse situation.

EFFECTS OF COLLECTIVE RUMINATION ON ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

We have outlined that organizational resilience requires perceptions of *control*, *commitment*, and *challenge* (Brueller et al., 2019). Based on our elaborations on the dynamic nature of collective rumination, we now theorize about its effects on each of these aspects.

Collective rumination impairs collective perceptions of control

To deal with an adverse situation, organization members should have a feeling of control over the situation (Brueller et al., 2019; Stoverink et al., 2020). However, ruminating organization members will have a low sense of control for several reasons. First, as we have elaborated, they are likely to attribute control to someone external, for example, the top management (Speier & Frese, 1997). That way, they may overlook opportunities to change the situation themselves.

Second, ruminators may speculate about causes and consequences of the problem, but their speculations will be negatively biased and revolve around worst-case scenarios (Marmenout, 2011). While openness to and the proactive search for novel information about the situation enables organization members "to sidestep potential biases" (Ellis et al., 2014, p. 68), the selective attention to mostly negative and uncontrollable aspects hinders the consideration of relevant factors that may have caused the adverse situation (Magni et al., 2013; Pillai et al., 2017; Watkins, 2008). Thus, the identification of the "true" causes and consequences as well as potential solutions are unlikely. This will again reduce the feeling of control, diminishing the capability to cope with an adverse situation.

Moreover, through the repetitive expression of negative thoughts and emotions, collective rumination may shape the affect climate in an organization, the "shared perception of organizational aspects […] as well as the behaviors that are expected, supported, or rewarded regarding their affective expressions or experiences" (Parke & Seo, 2017, p. 335). The verbal expression and non-verbal display of negative emotions associated with the adverse situation contribute to the formation of a negative organizational affect climate. Not only will members of an organization develop negative interpretations of events based on it (González-Romá et al., 2002), but the affect climate will serve as a framework regarding the appropriate range of emotions and how they should be expressed toward others (Parke & Seo, 2017). Consequently, the resulting negative affect climate will increase perceptions of low control to cope with the situation once more. Hence, we propose:

> *Proposition 3a*   Collective rumination is negatively related to organization members' feeling of control over the adverse situation; this reduces the likelihood for them to see possibilities to change the situation themselves.

Collective rumination impairs the commitment to get involved in action

Resilience requires organization members' commitment to jointly act in the interest of the organization (Brueller et al., 2019). However, collective rumination should impair organization members' commitment as they become increasingly immersed in negativity due to their focus on negative thoughts and emotions instead of ways to overcome the adverse situation. As a consequence, ruminators get stuck in their worries, which diminishes their motivation to act upon the problem (Magni et al., 2013) and demoralizes the entire group (Marmenout, 2011). Moreover, because the conversation in collective rumination focuses on what went wrong rather than involving an active, less negatively biased search for actions and solutions (Roese & Epstude, 2017), it should result in a collective "feeling of helplessness" (Martinko & Gardner, 1982; Teodorescu & Erev, 2014). The conclusion that "we cannot do anything about it anyway" will leave ruminators in a state of passivity and despair.

If people are not trusting their capabilities to change the situation, the extent to which they engage in potential improvements will be limited (e.g., De Jong, & Elfring, 2010). Relatedly, recent evidence points to detrimental effects of rumination on broader work-related outcomes such as proactive behavior (Chan & McAllister, 2014) and work engagement (Kinnunen et al., 2017). The over-investment into problem talk leads to emotional exhaustion and depletion of cognitive resources that are not available to cope with the situation at hand. After excessive negative discussions about the adverse situation, organization members will not have the resources to get involved in action to change the situation for the better. Instead, collective rumination may lead to a state of "path dependency" (von Sydow et al., 2009), where organization members exhibit conservative actions and reduced attempts to change structures and practices.

Thereby, collective rumination may not only reduce organization members' commitment to *act* in order to overcome an adverse situation, but it may even lead to employee *silence*, that is, the withholding of information about performance problems (Madrid et al., 2015), as organization members will be depleted by collective rumination. In support of our argument, employee silence has been attributed to "disengagement substantially explained by the experience of limited energy and disinterest" (Madrid et al., 2015, p. 1893). Hence, we propose:

Proposition 3b Collective rumination is negatively related to organization members' commitment; this reduces the likelihood for them to initiate joint action to overcome the adverse situation.

Collective rumination impairs the acceptance of adversity as a challenge

Challenge—the acceptance of adversity as an opportunity to learn from it—is a third important requirement for resilience (Brueller et al., 2019). However, collective rumination will prevent organization members from viewing the situation as a challenge; instead, they will perceive it as a threat. The famous psychotherapist and founding father of solution-focused psychotherapy, Steve de Shazer, supposedly coined the saying 'Problem talk creates problems, solution talk creates solutions' (de Shazer & Dolan, 2012). This means that finding solutions requires a positive, hopeful and future-oriented language; instead, talking about problems in a negative, pessimistic, and past-oriented way—as is characteristic of collective rumination—will result in the perception of the situation as an insurmountable obstacle.

On a related note, adverse situations often trigger counterfactual thinking (Roese & Epstude, 2017), the "generation of imagined mental representations of alternative versions of the past" (Watkins, 2008,

p. 165). Thereby, *downward* counterfactuals specify in what ways the adverse situation could have been worse, and *upward* counterfactuals focus on how the adverse situation might have been better (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese & Epstude, 2017). By definition, collective rumination revolves around the question of what went wrong (Marmenout, 2011); hence, ruminators will mostly share upward counterfactuals, which may evoke and reinforce their negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and anger once more. If upward counterfactuals reveal causal means-end relationships to improve the situation or find ways to avoid a similar situation in the future ("If we had made a more detailed plan, we could have finished the project in time"), they can be adaptive (Roese & Epstude, 2017; Watkins, 2008).

However, in collective rumination, upward counterfactuals will be skewed toward the negative and lack enough specifications to identify ways to improve the situation (Parikh et al., 2020). Additionally, ruminators might focus on aspects of the adverse situations that are, in fact, beyond their control anyway and think of almost impossible scenarios in their counterfactual thinking (De Brigard & Parikh, 2019), further escalating their negative emotions. Hence, ruminators will likely be caught in a state of high emotional negativity that prevents them from looking at the problem as a (future) challenge and impairs problem solving and creativity (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Zhao, 2011; see also Grawitch et al., 2003; Harvey, 2014).

Furthermore, when a situation is perceived as a threat instead of a challenge, organizations react by restricting the information considered for decision-making, considering a low number of action alternatives, and concentrating control (Staw et al., 1981). Perceived threats foster retention and rigidity; under threat, organization members maintain established thinking and organizational practices although they are not effective to cope with an adverse situation (McKinley et al., 2014); they stick to their "business as usual" (Gilbert, 2005). That is, perceived threats lead to conservative, internally directed actions and reduced attempts at changing existing structures (Chattopadhyay et al., 2001). Based on these findings, we argue that by appraising adversities as threats, an organization will get stuck in existing structures and practices although these may not be useful anymore. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 3c Collective rumination is negatively related to organization members' acceptance of the adverse situation as a challenge; this reduces the likelihood that they will find creative ways to improve the organization's structures and processes.

Taken together, in the face of adversity, collective rumination will diminish organization members' sense of control, commitment to action, and acceptance of the situation as a challenge (Brueller et al., 2019). This will reduce the likelihood for them to see possibilities to change the situation themselves (Proposition 3a), to initiate joint action to overcome the adverse situation (Proposition 3b), and to find innovative ways to improve organizational structures and processes to emerge from it better prepared for the future (Proposition 3c). Instead, collective rumination extends the adverse experience and maintains the awareness of an unresolved situation, leading to prolonged and increased stress reactions (see also Brosschot et al., 2006; Krys et al., 2020). Consequently, we propose:

Proposition 4 Collective rumination is negatively related to organizational resilience.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we have introduced *collective rumination*—repetitive and excessive discussions of adverse events among multiple organization members that center on the negative and uncontrollable

aspects of the situation—as a prevalent but undertheorized collective response to adversity in organizations. In the following, we discuss the theoretical contributions, avenues for future research, and practical implications of our conceptual paper.

Theoretical implications

With our theorizing, we make two main contributions to the literature. As a first contribution, building on earlier observations by Marmenout (2011), we have developed a detailed process perspective of collective rumination, which emerges due to a desire for emotional relief and social support (Proposition 1a) and is reinforced by the feeling of closeness and a lack of critical reflection (Proposition 1b). Hence, collective rumination can be considered as the organization members' attempt to cope with a stressful and adverse situation by turning toward each other. We agree with Barton and Kahn (2019) that sharing negative thoughts and emotions increases the feeling of closeness and shifts the burden of strain from the individuals to the collective. However, there is a risk involved that has been neglected until now: The pleasant feeling of closeness may prevent organization members from challenging the shared negative interpretation of the situation; instead, it may reinforce organization members' readiness to share negative thoughts and emotions once more.

Collective rumination unfolds through the rapid convergence on a shared negative situational assessment (Proposition 2a) and mutual contagion with negative emotions (Proposition 2b), which form a self-reinforcing vicious cycle that can hardly be interrupted (Proposition 2c). We have discussed two mechanisms why collective rumination is self-perpetuating: First, while collective rumination is an attempt to overcome adversity by turning toward others, the nature of the interaction increases negativity. Second, although it is not functional for coping with adversity, it fosters a feeling of closeness, which maintains and reinforces problem talk and suppresses critical reflection. In consequence, as long as there is an acute adverse situation and, without purposeful intervention (e.g., from a supervisor), collective rumination is unlikely to stop. With this detailed analysis of a novel phenomenon, we advance the understanding of the social dynamics in "problem talk" in organizations, which was limited until now as it focused on unidirectional effects (i.e., effects on the "complainer" or the "listener"; Affifi et al., 2013; Brans et al., 2014; Haggard et al., 2011). Our theorizing pinpoints previously neglected social dynamics among multiple organization members, who are all affected by adversity and interact to cope with it.

As a second contribution, while earlier studies have investigated effects of problem talk on the individual (Behfar et al., 2019) and the group (Marmenout, 2011), we theorized on its effects for the entire organization, more exactly, on organizational resilience. With our dynamic process perspective on organizational resilience, we respond to recent calls to elucidate how it may be diminished over time (Fisher et al., 2019). We argued that organization members, who ruminate together, will perceive low control over the situation (Proposition 3a), have little commitment to get involved in action in the organization's interest (Proposition 3b), and cannot accept adversity as a challenge to grow from it (Proposition 3c). Paradoxically, in collective rumination, organization members will invest more and more effort to make the situation more pleasant without achieving it. Thereby, collective rumination has a positive side-effect: The feeling of closeness evoked by collective rumination serves as a strong "glue" of the social relationships among organizations members. They will perceive their conversation as supportive, which will increase organization members' satisfaction with their work relationships (see also Haggard et al., 2011). However, at the same time, immersion in negativity may also impair individuals' task performance (e.g., Baranik et al., 2017), because it consumes resources that are then not available for concurrent tasks (cf. *processing efficiency theory*; see Eysenck et al., 2007).

By highlighting the negative effects of collective rumination for organizational resilience, this article is among the first (cp Barton & Kahn, 2019; Stoverink et al., 2020) to acknowledge the possibility of *dysfunctional* social interactions in adverse situations. While Barton and Kahn elaborated on potential risks of *defensive* mechanisms where organization members suppress negative thoughts and emotions, our theorizing highlights previously neglected effects of *excessive attention* to negative thoughts and emotions. Going beyond Barton and Kahn's theorizing, we made the point that talking about adversity can reduce organizational resilience if such conversations are centered on negative and uncontrollable aspects of the situation. In short, our analysis—somewhat counterintuitively—implies that "talking can hurt."

Avenues for future research

Our theoretical analysis of collective rumination opens up interesting avenues for future empirical research. The first set of future research questions deals with the *phenomenon of collective rumination* itself. As a first step, researchers may want to study collective rumination in the field, using structured interviews or behavioral observations to explore when it occurs (i.e., its triggers) and how it manifests (i.e., its empirical factors). Our conceptual analysis may serve as a starting point for developing interview guidelines or coding manuals.

Further, building on our conceptual analysis, empirical researchers may want to develop and validate a scale to capture collective rumination. Because collective rumination is conceptualized as a higher-level phenomenon (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999), a multi-level approach in scale development is necessary and adequate (Bonito & Keyton, 2019; Klein & Kozslowski, 2000). This collective rumination measure should account for the specific pattern of conversation and discussion that we have conceptually described in our paper and consider different dimensions, such as the repetitive sharing of negative thoughts and emotions and the mutual encouragement of problem talk. A parsimonious scale to assess collective rumination will allow for an investigation of its contingencies and outcomes related to organizational resilience and beyond (e.g., work engagement or team cohesion).

Moreover, future research may study whether there are different types of rumination depending on the nature of the associated emotions. In our theorizing, we followed the established practice to consider negative emotions as a higher-order factor (Watson & Clark, 1992). While adverse situations may elicit a broad range of different emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, or shame (Bagozzi & Pieters, 1998), there is evidence that the desire to vent is independent of the *type* of emotions (Rimé et al., 1998). Still, venting different emotions may have different effects (Brans et al., 2014) and relate to different levels or elicit different "shades" of collective rumination: For instance, fear is related to higher levels of uncertainty than anger (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985); hence fear may result in more whining and worrying, whereas anger might lead to more complaining and blaming. Future research may investigate these relationships.

As a second set of research questions, future research may look into structural *contingencies of collective rumination*. A bureaucratic structure—a centralized formal authority along with inflexible programs and policies—for example, may increase the risk of collective rumination to occur and worsen its effect on organizational resilience as it limits the opportunities of organization members to jointly act to overcome an adverse situation. Similarly, an organization structure characterized by *high interdependency* between actors requires close and frequent interaction; this should facilitate the contagious processes involved in rumination (Hogg, 1993). Future research may expose these presumed relationships to empirical investigation.

As another contingency, the current Covid-19 crisis has drastically changed the way we interact; many of us are working remotely and use videoconferences and chat tools to collaborate with others. This raises the question of how computer-mediated communication influences the dynamics and effects of collective rumination. The existing research on virtual teams is inconclusive: On one side, computer-mediated communication is less rich than face-to-face interactions and verbal and non-verbal cues are lacking (e.g., Schaubroeck & Yu, 2017); hence, contagious processes and conformity pressures may be reduced, minimizing the risk of collective rumination. On the other side, negative emotions are expressed more openly and frequently in virtual settings (e.g., Kafetsios et al., 2017), which may increase the likelihood of collective rumination to emerge. Thus, empirical explorations of collective rumination in remote teams seem an intriguing opportunity for future research.

Managerial implications

Due to the detrimental effects of collective rumination for organizations, we close our elaborations by devising avenues to counteract it. As a first step, leaders have to realize that collective rumination is present. In this context, coding manuals developed for observational studies or checklists of indicators of collective rumination may prove useful. Once they have recognized that organization members are caught in a vicious spiral of negative emotions and negative interpretations of a situation, leaders could stimulate different—more constructive—interpretations of the situation by increasing cognitive diversity and bringing in diverse perspectives. While groups with low diversity were shown to spend less time discussing divergent opinions (Schippers et al., 2003), high diversity is assumed to broaden the knowledge and skills set available for dealing with adversity (Cox et al., 1991). Second, leaders may intentionally encourage and stimulate more constructive forms of conversation, such as structured reflection (Otte et al., 2019), which may foster a solution focus instead of a problem focus (de Shazer & Dolan, 2012), facilitating the development of effective strategies to overcome adversity. Structured reflection may allow for a more critical assessment of the status quo (Knipfer et al., 2013), helping to sidestep the biases associated with collective rumination. Moreover, by means of reflection, the learning potential of upward counterfactuals (Roese & Epstude, 2017; Watkins, 2008) may be seized. Since there is a risk that others encourage collective rumination, the involvement of professional coaches, or organization members who were trained to be "challenger listeners" (Behfar et al., 2019), seems useful. Finally, leaders may reduce collective rumination by providing a shared positive vision as a context for constructive conversations and by communicating confidence that the organization is capable to deal with adversity and even emerge better prepared than before (Berson et al., 2006).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Ethics approval is not required for this conceptual analysis.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study

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