

# A pandemic is dynamic

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COMMENTARY

## A pandemic is dynamic: Viewing COVID-19 through an adaptation lens

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The focal article by Rudolph et al. (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of relevant industrial-organizational (I-O) research and practice domains that are pivotal in understanding how the COVID-19 crisis affects work, people, and organizations and gives guidance regarding how I-O research might address the effects of COVID-19 on work and organizational processes. However, we missed a very important perspective that has not been sufficiently covered: a major pandemic demarcates a temporal transition that splits time into pre- and postpandemic phases and requires individuals, teams, and organizations to adapt to the new postpandemic reality. In the focal article, the pandemic is predominantly treated as a moderating factor that changes the environmental context for employees and organizations (a notable exception is the dynamic treatment of stress during the pandemic); the term adaptation was mentioned only once in the entire manuscript (regarding the effect of paid leave on family adaptation). Therefore, to complement their proposal and advance understanding of the influence of COVID-19 and potential future pandemics on organizational behavior, we suggest that researchers adopt a more temporal lens, conceptualizing pandemics as major change events to which entities must adapt. The burgeoning literature on adaptation at different levels of analysis provides a relevant framework for understanding how entities are affected by events as well as their ability to recover from events over time.

Adaptation has been defined in terms of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral modifications that are made in response to the demands of a new or changing environment or event (Baard et al., 2014). Thus, *adaptation* refers to the process of adjusting to challenges, whereas *adaptability* is used to refer to the inherent ability of an entity to adjust, and *adaptive outcomes* refer to the consequences of adaptation—for instance, in terms of performance or well-being (Maynard et al., 2015). The COVID-19 crisis can be considered a major externally originating event that disrupts ongoing processes and necessitates the development of novel routines. Research on adaptation indicates that depending on the adaptation phase, different characteristics may differentially affect relevant outcomes (e.g., Hale et al., 2016). In particular, a distinction has been made between *transition adaptation*, referring to the immediate effect of an event on relevant outcomes, and *reacquisition adaptation*, referring to the longer term outcomes of the event as entities engage in adaptive processes to manage the effects of the event (Lang & Bliese, 2009). Based on this distinction and as shown in Figure 1, we would like to point out two aspects that

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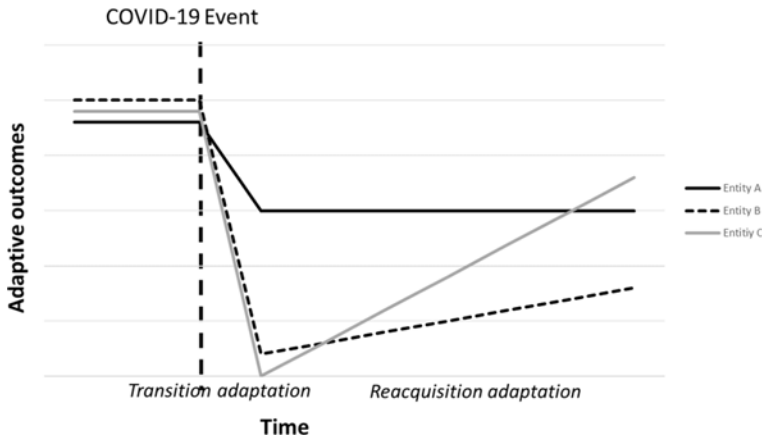


Figure 1. Potential adaptation outcome trajectories as a reaction to a major pandemic event.

can explain variation in the influence of pandemics on outcome trajectories over time: (a) the immediate effect of pandemics is not equal among all entities and (b) adaptability may differ between entities.

### The immediate effect of pandemics is not equal to all entities

There are three main reasons why we cannot assume that a disruptive event such as a pandemic will equally affect all entities in organizations. First, the main characteristics of the event (novelty, disruptiveness, and criticality) are experienced differently by different entities. Second, pandemics are not singular events but comprise complex interactions of multiple aspects. Third, entities are not responding to objective events but instead are actively and collectively making sense of events.

Morgeson *et al.* (2015) propose that the extent to which events are novel, disruptive, and critical determines to what extent they have an influence on an entity. In facing a pandemic, each of these factors may potentially differ between entities. For instance, novelty will be lower for entities in countries that have been previously exposed to comparable infectious diseases, such as SARS (e.g., Webster, 2020). Disruptiveness, or the degree of change in usual activities, may differ depending on the extent to which entities have had previous experiences with operating under the new circumstances, for instance with virtual collaboration (e.g., Rico *et al.*, 2011). Criticality, or the extent to which an event is essential for the core process of the entity, is likely to be particularly high for individuals, teams, and organizations operating in sectors such as healthcare, hospitality, and tourism or for individuals (or their families) who are directly affected by the virus.

Second, it is important to note that when referring to a pandemic as a major disruptive event, we are ultimately pointing to a set of multiple changes rather than a single change. The pandemic is combining changes related to health, the economy, supply chains, consumer preferences, and personal and organizational values, among others. As such, it is the combination and interaction of these factors as well as the oftentimes incompatible demands caused by them that together determine the level of complexity each specific entity is facing (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, this complexity is likely to change over time both due to exogenous forces as well as in response to actions taken by the entity itself, which may reduce or increase the complexity it faces (Hærem *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, entities do not objectively respond to events but are actively experiencing and interpreting events in order to manage them (Rico *et al.*, 2019). In the literature, this process has been

labeled *sensemaking* and is crucial in understanding why the same disruptive event will mean different things for different organizational entities. Sensemaking has been characterized as an active process across different levels of analysis—a process by which entities interpret and give meaning to external events based on previous experiences and complex interpersonal processes (Weick, 1995). The high levels of uncertainty in prediction of health risk levels and ambiguity on the potential effects of COVID-19 on societies and the economy leaves much room for widely diverging interpretations of the situation (varying, for instance, between excessive optimism to severe pessimism), which is likely to have an effect on how entities will react.

### Adaptability may differ between entities

An adaptation perspective enables us not only to distinguish the extent to which an entity is immediately disrupted by a pandemic but also to identify factors that may explain entities' ability to cope with the event (Rico et al., 2019). Adaptability reflects an entities' inherent ability to adapt in the face of a disruption (Maynard et al., 2015). Adaptability has been studied on various levels including organizations, teams, and individuals, with different foci on each level. Research on organizational-level adaptability has focused on structural and strategic aspects, emphasizing for instance the role of dynamic capabilities (high-level organizational routines for adjusting to changing circumstances; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) and slack resources (e.g., Voss et al., 2008). Research on adaptability on the team level has stressed the importance of inputs such as goal orientation and leadership, as well as emergent team level properties such as a shared understanding of the task situation and a transactive memory system (an efficient system for capitalizing on the differentiated expertise within the group; Christian et al., 2017). Research on individual level adaptation has focused on individual characteristics, showing for instance that adaptability is influenced by factors including cognitive ability, openness to experience, and goal orientation (Baard et al., 2014). Together, these perspectives provide insight into factors that may explain why some individuals, teams, and organizations are better able to effectively respond to pandemics than others.

Apart from these factors relating to adaptability at different levels, scholars have also stressed the importance of the process of adaptation (e.g., Baard et al., 2014). As such, adaptation has been conceptualized both at the individual and team levels in terms of recurrent phase models with a number of processes that enable an entity to understand the changing situation, self-regulate, and articulate plans to cope with it and learn from its consequences (e.g., Burke et al., 2006; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Rico et al., 2019). The general proposition underlying these process models is that the quality and completeness of these processes predicts an entity's ability to adapt.

Additionally, in light of the importance put in the focal article on leadership, we want to emphasize the role of leadership and followership in the adaptation process. Although we do not disagree with the notion that “when perceived uncertainty is high, [...] leader behavior has stronger effects on important employee and organizational outcomes” (Rudolph et al., 2021, p. 32), we do regard it as important to conceptualize and study leadership as a reciprocal, interdependent, and *coconstructed* process. A single leader is unlikely to possess all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are necessary to adapt to a complex, ambiguous event in the most effective way. Instead, the adverse effects of an immediate crisis can be minimized if team members become involved in sense- and decision-making processes and leaders encourage the integration of different perspectives and distributed expertise. Recent theorizing therefore cautions against portraying leadership as being predominantly one directional and hierarchical and instead conceptualizes leadership as the property of whole systems in which the acts of leading and following are described as a “complex, adaptive process” (DeRue, 2011, p. 125; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Finally, we want to point out that disruptive events also provide opportunities for innovation and changing the status quo. Events can disrupt steady states and promote effortful, controlled

information processing (Morgeson, 2005). Particularly when ongoing routines and processes are interrupted, these can become opportunities for entities to “actively evaluate their progress, consider alternative paths, and determine the direction their group should follow in the subsequent work period” (Okhuysen & Waller, 2002, p. 1057). Thus, interruptions may result in the acquisition of new work routines and can trigger organizational changes (e.g., Zellmer-Bruhn, 2003).

## Conclusion

An adaptation perspective provides a valuable lens for investigating and predicting the dynamic trajectory of pandemics, such as the COVID-19 crisis, on relevant outcomes. Such trajectories will render different forms between entities (see, Figure 1) depending on their adaptability and the extent to which the pandemic is understood as novel, disruptive, critical, and complex. Variation in the effects of pandemics will be found first in the drop in relevant outcomes immediately following the onset of the pandemic (transition adaptation) and, second, in the speed at which the entity is able to regain or even surpass former outcome levels over time in coping with the crisis (reacquisition adaptation). We hope this commentary enhances Rudolph *et al.*'s (2021) reflections and encourages scholars in I-O psychology to adopt a more dynamic and adaptive stance.

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