Editorial

Working Under Pandemic Conditions

Crisis as an Opportunity for Change and Some Thoughts on the Future of Work

Oliver Weigelt¹, Bernd Marcus², Jörg Felfe³, Annette Kluge⁴, and Greta Ontrup⁴

¹Institute of Psychology – Wilhelm Wundt, Faculty of Life Sciences, Leipzig University, Germany

²Institute of Business Administration, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Rostock, Germany

³Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Helmut Schmidt University / University of the Federal Armed Forces Hamburg, Germany

⁴Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany

Working Under Pandemic Conditions – Some Reflections on Reoccurring Themes

Among many other things, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 marked the beginning of what might be considered one of the largest unplanned field experiments ever in the world of work. In response to this situation, the German government enacted public-health measures, like social distancing, to slow down disease transmission rates (Steinmetz et al., 2021). For many companies and organizations, these measures led to massive and unexpected changes in work and organizational processes. The so-called lockdown led to the discontinuation of production lines, short-time work, and unemployment as well as to newly established modes of work, such as remote or mobile workplaces (home office), the use of digital teamwork tools, and new meeting cultures. Leadership became more remote, and distant leadership and corporate communication had to find new ways to coordinate activities. The COVID-19 pandemic ended up affecting almost every aspect of work environments, conditions, and procedures. But these unexpected radical changes also meant a crisis for many of those affected.

In this Editorial, we first highlight several themes affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific example of crisis or mega-event (Morgeson et al., 2015) and focus on issues that relate to the studies featured in this collection of papers. We then describe the core findings and discuss the implications of these studies, highlighting several themes addressed in one or more of the papers compiled in this special issue, before summarizing the focal studies and discussing their implications.

The Pandemic and the Onset of Countermeasures as a Discrete Event

Although the COVID-19 pandemic evolved over a period of weeks and months, starting with the first reports of a new SARS-virus in late 2019, the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11th 2020 marks a discrete event that splits time into a before and after. For decades, happenings bounded in time or (work) events have been phenomena of interest to researchers (Morgeson et al., 2015; see also Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Similar empirical research was done on large-scale traumatic events like the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007), natural disasters (Beal & Ghandour, 2011), and outbreaks of earlier variants of the SARS virus in several Asian countries (Maunder et al., 2006). Yet, the research on working under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions is unique because it has disrupted the work lives of workers around the world and still determines everyday lives of people 18 months after its onset.

To date, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a showcase of the unfolding nature of such phenomena. Interestingly, although theoretical ideas on how stressors may affect employees over time were documented decades ago (Frese & Zapf, 1988), e.g., in terms of accumulation effects, sleeper-effects, or adaptation to stressors over time, work and organizational research in the early 2020s is not only dominated by variable-centered approaches, but more importantly, it is characterized by new ways of thinking about the experience of work (Weiss & Rupp, 2011). For instance, even research dedicated explicitly to changes in the world of work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic tends to emphasize generic

resource theories like conservation of resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014) rather than making explicit reference to the events per se. One reason may be that researchers taking the “event road” are dependent on rather broad theories on events, like event system theory (Morgeson et al., 2015) or theories of transition (Bliese et al., 2017), some of which date back to the early 1980s (Schlossberg, 1981). In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to make work-related events more focal in empirical research and in theory-building in work and organizational psychology.

The Pandemic as a Unique Opportunity to Study Adaptivity

The onset of the pandemic affected a broad range of domains and core topics of work and organizational psychology, such as telecommuting, virtual teamwork, and leadership (Rudolph et al., 2020). A common theme across these topics is an emphasis on how individuals adapt, whether working in or leading teams and organizations. Conceptually, adaptation has been defined as a process, but it has not always been studied as such (Lang et al., 2021). In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to study processes of adaptation and change in situ and in a naturalistic context.

The Pandemic as a Practical Demonstration of the Meaning of Work-Family Interaction

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a large-scale case study on what happens when employees must deal with their own (school) children while at the same time trying to maintain adequate levels of job performance. As Syrek and colleagues recently put it (2021, p. 1), during the COVID-19 pandemic employees had to be “an accountant, cook, entertainer, and teacher – all at the same time.” In other words, working under the pandemic conditions brought interrole conflicts between the life domains of work and family to the forefront and provided an impressive practical demonstration of work-family conflict (Allen & Martin, 2017). There are anecdotal reports from parents introducing a two-shift system as a work-around, where one parent takes the early shift and works from early morning to afternoon while the other parent takes care of the children. In the afternoon, the late shift begins, and the partners switch roles. Similar and alternative arrangements are documented in empirical research as well (Shockley et al., 2021). Yet even this privileged situation, where both partners are available to take care of children and have the opportunity to work

flexibly (time, location), makes it clear to witnesses and those immediately affected that work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts are more than just nuisance factors to everyone involved. Importantly, working during the pandemic has not only affected the prevalence of work-family conflict, but probably also changed the quality and intensity of such conflicts.

The Relevance of the Pandemic to Teamwork

When employees were sent to work from home to slow down the spread of the virus, they faced not only challenges associated with their individual work arrangements, like work-family conflicts; in many cases, they also faced the challenge of continuing to collaborate in a virtual environment: Previously colocated teams were forced to work together virtually (Feitosa & Salas, 2021). Of course, virtual teamwork is not a new phenomenon and has been implemented to some degree in many occupational settings (Raghuram, et al. 2001). However, the COVID-19-driven virtual teamwork situation differed in multiple ways from known and researched virtual team settings. First, virtual teamwork became a necessity in industries and positions in which remote working conditions had previously not been established. In these environments, guidelines – or even support – on establishing virtual teamwork were not available (Rudolph et al., 2020). Second, teams had to adjust to the virtual working context rapidly, leaving no time for establishing best practices (e.g., selecting leaders based on their virtual leadership expertise or offering technology training; Kircullen et al., 2021). Third, virtual teamwork became a necessity for ensuring safe working conditions and business survival rather than an option for those interested or able to collaborate remotely (Wang et al., 2021). Lastly, teams were faced with additional stressors stemming from the pandemic, like new or unfamiliar procedures (Tannenbaum et al., 2021). These circumstances differ drastically from the situations and conditions under which previous findings on virtual teamwork were obtained. Feitosa and Salas (2021) conclude that what we know about virtual teams might not apply to virtual teamwork under pandemic conditions. For instance, the question of how to establish trust in virtual teams is being replaced by the question of how to maintain trust (Feitosa & Salas, 2021); or the need for evidence on conditions under which virtual teamwork is indicated is being replaced by the need for evidence on how to make the best use of virtual working conditions (Wang et al., 2021). In anticipation of further rapid shifts between colocated and virtual teamwork – and maybe increased hybrid teams – more

research is needed that includes the temporal dimensions of changing working conditions as an important determinant of (virtual) team effectiveness (Kilcullen et al., 2021).

The Pandemic's Relevance to Leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis interrupted regular working processes with sudden and crucial effects on the working environments and the well-being of employees worldwide (Luceño-Moreno et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). It posed a challenge for leadership as reflected in the current debate on leadership effectiveness during the crisis (Ahmed et al., 2020; Brammer & Clark, 2020; Budhwar & Cumming, 2020; Klebe et al., 2021). Generally, positive leadership represents an important workplace resource not only to ensure performance and goal accomplishment but also to maintain and improve employees' health. However, in the face of that crisis, leaders and employees have had to cope with specific hindrance stressors (e.g., reorganization of work routines, stalled projects, establishing virtual communication, social isolation) that may impede performance, leadership, health, and well-being (LePine et al., 2005). Moreover, leaders are affected themselves and may suffer from stress, overload, and insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged leadership through different mechanisms (Halverson et al., 2004; Hannah et al., 2009). First, it is unclear whether leaders reduce or even strengthen their efforts to engage in positive leadership when the crisis becomes more severe. By focusing on the health and well-being of followers, health-oriented leadership (HoL; Franke et al., 2014) may be of particular interest in this situation. It is conceivable that leaders do strengthen health-oriented behaviors, but it may be also likely that they withdraw from positive behaviors because they lack capacities (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In turn, reduced leader support implies a loss of resources for followers with further negative consequences for their health. Second, it is unclear whether health-oriented leadership is more or less effective during crises. Crises may overshadow the effects of health-oriented behavior, or leadership may become particularly important and even more crucial (de Hoogh et al., 2004; Giorgi et al., 2015; Mucci et al., 2016). Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has not affected all organizations equally in terms of concrete hindrances in everyday routines at work (e.g., increasing hassles, stagnation, or ambiguity; Nicola et al., 2020). The severity of the crises may influence opportunities and risks for leadership. From a theoretical and practical perspective, it is important to better understand the potential of leadership and how leadership may change during crises.

The Pandemic as an Amplifier of Digital Transformation Trends

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with unique challenges to individuals, teams, and organizations, to some extent it can be seen as a trigger that has contributed to amplifying or speeding up developments in how we work that were underway long before the national lockdowns began in 2020. For instance, more flexible work arrangements like telecommuting are not new at all (Allen et al., 2015), but suddenly became ubiquitous across many industries during the national lockdowns and beyond. At the time of writing this, it is an open question whether work arrangements like telework will (ever) return to prepandemic levels. Whereas some organizational leaders and human-resource professionals have been persuaded of the advantages of flexible work, others stress the unique benefits of coworking together in the same place and at the same time. In any case, the COVID-19 pandemic has put these work arrangements to the test in a large-scale format, including work contexts where flexible work was never considered a viable option. Hence, research on adapting to these altered ways of working not only provides an idea of how the future of (flexible) work may look and feel like, it also helps to identify optimal ways of implementing job (re-)design tailored to the needs of employees, leaders, and employers.

The Pandemic as a Reminder to Consider Time in Research

Research in and on the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates and exemplifies that, although we have an abundance of theories and psychological constructs available, most – if not all – of the dominant approaches in our field do not explicitly incorporate time (George & Jones, 2000; Roe, 2008). Consequently, researchers in work and organizational psychology either must avoid issues of time or admit that theory does not provide specific guidance on, for instance, how long it takes for the effects of suddenly having to physically distance-work from one's colleagues to surface and how long these effects might last (Mitchell & James, 2001). Interestingly, in a primarily deductive paradigm, research aiming to describe trajectories of psychological variables as the effects of a pandemic unfolds appears to provide no novel theoretical contribution, because of its descriptive approach. Consistent with this issue, in their review of time in organizational research, Shipp and Cole (2015, p. 252) suggested that, “although it may seem like a step backward, in many

areas descriptive within-person research may need more attention before explanatory research can proceed.“

From this perspective, research on working under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions may not only provide evidence on specific phenomena associated with crisis, it may also remind us of the need for empirical evidence on temporal issues – and could pave the way toward developing theories that include issues of time. Moreover, empirical research that primarily addresses practical problems (rather than theoretical ones) may even provide the much-needed basis for refining theory and for providing more specific guidance on temporal issues.

Scope of the Special Issue

The studies presented in this special issue cover a broad range of topics and focus on different layers ranging from changes in individuals to changes in teamwork, in the use of technology, and in leadership.

In the first paper, Zacher, Rudolph, and Posch (2021) present a longitudinal study examining trajectories of three aspects of self-reported employee performance (task proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity) before, during, and after the first national lockdown in Germany. They apply discontinuous growth modeling to complete panel data from 591 employees across eight survey waves collected between December 2019 and September 2020. The results suggest that the onset of the first national lockdown in March 2020 was associated with a drop in task proficiency and proactivity, but not adaptivity. They further found that levels of performance re-increased again after public life was reactivated in May 2020. Going beyond merely describing these trajectories, Zacher and colleagues examine whether core self-evaluations modify the rate of change at any of the stages, finding that they do not buffer the adverse effects of the national lockdown but do speed up the (re-)increase in task proficiency and adaptivity – but not proactivity – during the post-lockdown period. Of note, this is one of the few studies on working during the pandemic to include prepandemic baseline data and thus allows for a precise description of how the variables under study have actually changed within a person over time.

In the second article, Rieth and Hagemann (2021) cross-sectionally compare teleworkers with employees continuing to work in their regular workplaces regarding their subjective well-being, perceived stress, sense of control, and trust in the government. Importantly, they also consider whether having children or not predicts differences in well-being and perceived stress among teleworkers. The results suggest that, generally speaking,

employees working in occupations and jobs that permit working from home report superior life satisfaction, higher affective well-being and greater trust in the government, and lower levels of perceived stress. With one exception (higher loss of control over career success for teleworkers), teleworkers seem to be better off compared to nonteleworkers. Further, comparing teleworkers with those without stay-at-home children, Rieth and Hagemann found that having children at home while trying to work is associated with lower levels of affective well-being, higher levels of perceived stress, and higher levels of loss of control over work. Importantly, having to take care of children while teleworking seems to neutralize or even jeopardize the benefits of working from home (vs. in the regular workplace). Of note, Rieth and Hagemann found relatively large effect sizes across all comparisons. This study exemplifies the relevance of work-family to employee well-being in both general and in more specific terms when working in times of crisis.

In the third paper, Klostermann, Ontrup, Thomaschewski, and Kluge (2021) leverage the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique context to examine factors that support the successful adaptation of teams to altered work conditions. They consider trust and cohesion as team-related antecedents of team performance and team satisfaction and study the role of adaptive processes (communication, coordination, and cooperation) as well as the fit between the task, the team, and technology. Applying time-lagged survey data captured from 110 employees working in teams during the first national lockdown in Germany, the authors find that trust, task-technology fit, and communication are associated with perceived team performance. Contrary to hypotheses, Klostermann et al. found largely additive rather than interactive effects of team-related variables and process variables. Drawing on these findings, Klostermann et al. derive guidelines to facilitate the instant adaptation of teams in the future. The authors emphasize the distinction between routine vs. nonroutine situations and stress the potential of nonroutine situations, like the sudden implementation of virtual teamwork for team development. They conclude that nonroutine situations experienced in work teams shifting to virtual work during the first national lockdown in Germany may trigger adaptive processes that usually occur in stages of team formation. In other words, a step back may be needed for teams to make a significant step forward toward working effectively as a team under changes circumstances.

The fourth article reports a survey study among 264 employees by Klebe, Klug, and Felfe (2021), who examine the implications of the pandemic for staff-care and self-care as aspects of health-oriented leadership and emotional exhaustion. The authors see the COVID-19 pan-

dem as a unique context to study health-oriented leadership in times of crisis. They link perceptions of the pandemic with health-related behavior and in turn well-being of employees. The results suggest that high levels of crisis severity are associated with lower levels of health-oriented leadership. Furthermore, the strength of the association between health-oriented leadership and emotional exhaustion is strongest when crisis severity is highest. These findings imply a health-oriented leadership paradox (cf. the recovery paradox in Sonnentag, 2018, for a similar phenomenon): The more threatening the situation becomes and the more health-oriented leadership becomes necessary, the less health-oriented leadership is shown (or at least reported). Although this health-oriented leadership paradox is unfortunate, the good news is that lower levels of health-oriented leadership may not automatically translate into higher levels of exhaustion, because staff care is more efficient – and an overall lower dose of self-care may be needed in times of crisis to maintain levels of energetic well-being. For occupational health promotion, the organization may offer training and coaching to maintain health-oriented leadership specifically in crises.

In the fifth paper, Schaufel and Ellwart (2021) study the acceptance of technology use for consumers of public digital services. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a relevant context here because a considerable portion of users was forced to use public digital services for the first time. Although the introduction of digital services as a substitute for services that have traditionally been delivered or assisted by service-employees is not new at all (e.g., bank clients are encouraged to use online banking to avoid transaction fees), clients usually do have alternatives, although they may become less attractive and harder to access over time. In contrast, the need for physical distancing made digital service all of a sudden the only option, for instance, to report a crime to the police. Schaufel and Ellwart conducted a survey study among users of the public digital service “Onlinewache” during the first national lockdown in Germany. Their comparison of the attitudes and intentions of forced vs. voluntary users shows that forced first-time users of public digital services plan to continue using digital services, and that trust, perceived competence, and ease of use play key roles in explaining technology acceptance. From the perspective of applied social influence or consumer psychology (Felsler, 2015), considerable risks are associated with forcing consumers to discontinue using their favored products or services, because limiting freedom of choice is likely to result in reactance (Brehm, 1966) and hence to backfire. The study not only documents processes of persuasion when freedom of choice has been restricted in a naturalistic setting, it also

identifies leverage points for avoiding reactance and fostering acceptance of options that initially were outside of the consideration set.

In the sixth paper, Liebermann and colleagues (2021) revisit the domain of leadership from the perspective of supervisors rather than employees. More specifically, the authors study challenges to transformational leadership in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and explore the possibilities and obstacles to transformational leadership during the lockdown. Drawing on qualitative data from 20 supervisors in a public-sector organization, Liebermann et al. focus on how leaders experienced and dealt with the abrupt introduction of virtual teamwork in their teams and departments during the first national lockdown in Germany in March/April 2020. On the one hand, the authors extract several options for transformational leadership in the public sector in general, like providing meaningful tasks, developing a culture of trust, openness, and empowerment. On the other hand, they identify several obstacles to transformational leadership in the public sector in general, such as high time pressure, high workload, and constrained autonomy. In their summary of the options and constraints to transformational leadership during the first national lockdown, some of these themes re-emerge (e.g., high workload), while others seem to be largely unique to the abrupt implementation of telework in spring 2020, like barriers to (informal) communication. This study contributes to the growing literature on transformational leadership in the public sector by providing a comparison of the options and constraints of transformational leadership in the public sector in general vs. options and constraints specifically in turbulent times.

Conclusion

Above, we outlined how the sudden onset of the pandemic forced many employees across various industries to abandon their established ways of working, to improvise, and to make the best of the new situation. Thereupon, many of our colleagues in work and organizational psychology launched new studies or discovered ways to continue ongoing longitudinal studies overnight to document the impact of this true megaevent. Similarly, we editors, as five scholars from diverse settings, got in touch with one another and rather spontaneously decided to form a team of guest editors for a special issue on working during the pandemic. We received many submissions to our call for papers. Reading each of these submissions was worthwhile and exciting to us. The number of submissions provides ample evidence that working under the pandem-

ic conditions not only raises many questions concerning the heart of work and organizational psychology, but that we as a community of scholars and practitioners in work and organizational psychology are able to provide evidence-based answers to these questions. Scholars in our field are ready and able to take the initiative and to act rapidly to address pressing issues in practice. Yet, the work presented in this special issue and beyond is rooted in approaches and tools developed and validated long before the onset of this pandemic. In other words, work and organizational psychology provides a useful toolkit to address the challenges practitioners face, which becomes particularly obvious in times of crisis. In this sense, we hope that this special issue will not only contribute to disseminating new insights among scholars, but also to continuing and intensifying the exchange between science and practice – an exchange to the benefit of everyone. We think this pandemic may in fact turn out to be a grand opportunity for change – a change for the better!

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Dr. Oliver Weigelt
Prof. Dr. Bernd Marcus
Prof. Dr. Jörg Felfe
Prof. Dr. Annette Kluge
Greta Ontrup
 annette.kluge@ruhr-uni-bochum.de