

COMMENTARY

The emotional complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and organizational life

Allison S. Gabriel* , Mahira L. Ganster, Jerel E. Slaughter, and Rebecca L. MacGowan

Department of Management & Organizations, Eller College of Management, University of Arizona

*Corresponding author. Email: asgabriel@arizona.edu

As noted by Rudolph et al. (2021), pandemics have had dramatic effects on people and organizations. Within our lifetimes, the COVID-19 pandemic is the first global crisis that has shut down our normal lives and has upended “taken for granted” aspects of organizational life. Whether eliminating the ability for coworkers to meet in person, have water-cooler talk, or enter their workspaces, COVID-19 will have profound effects on employees for the foreseeable future.

Although there are many reasons that COVID-19 will have significant bearing on organizational life and there are several topics raised by Rudolph et al. (2021) that are worthy of consideration, there was little discussion about the emotional complexities of this salient event. Rudolph et al. note that aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to increase an individual’s anxiety and fatigue (i.e., strain), with additional theorizing surrounding anxiety posited when it comes to handling work–family conflict (e.g., working with children at home). However, people may experience a range of complex emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, as people return to work, they are likely to be grappling with hope and excitement at the thought of interacting with their peers in person, paired with anxiety and fear as they also recognize the risk of being exposed to the virus. For some, emotional complexity also results from trying to make sense of what they and others are experiencing simultaneously, as one therapist described: “I am so grateful and lucky to have all that I do and to be safe where I am. But it also hurts deeply to feel how others are struggling even more greatly at this time. This time for me is full of contrasts, intense waves of highs and lows unlike anything I’ve ever experienced” (Jackson, 2020).

We believe that organizational scholars must examine the emotional complexities associated with making sense of work during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this commentary (written July 2020 to help contextualize our examples), we discuss how COVID-19 represents a salient affective event for employees at work and at home and how the resulting emotions are likely to (a) be complex in nature and (b) fluctuate daily, weekly, and monthly as employees adjust to life during a pandemic.

Emotional complexity

Although many models of emotions are frequently used in the organizational sciences (e.g., Russell, 1980; Van Katwyk et al., 2000; Watson et al., 1988), a common theme is that individuals, at any given moment, can experience a wide array of discrete positive and negative emotions (Elfenbein, 2007). Importantly, emotions can serve as a critical self-regulatory cue for individuals, driving their behaviors and well-being (e.g., Beal et al., 2005; Carver & Scheier, 1990). Depending upon the self-regulatory theory to which one subscribes, either positive *or* negative emotions can

be beneficial for motivation. For example, according to control theory, negative emotions should signal that people's current state is discrepant from their ideal state, with positive emotions signaling that one is in a beneficial state; in turn, negative emotions should increase efforts to address the discrepancy, whereas positive emotions can signal that one can coast or maintain the status quo (Carver, 2003; Carver & Scheier, 1990). Applied to COVID-19, individuals could recognize that negative emotions (e.g., frustration) indicate that their current state (e.g., working from home with kids) is discrepant from their ideal state (e.g., being able to hold a call or Zoom meeting without interruption), signaling that added effort is needed to resolve this issue. In this example, a parent may decide to hire a babysitter or enroll their child in daycare despite the possible health risks associated with this decision. Alternatively, social cognitive theory suggests that positive emotions should increase effort toward goals, with negative emotions deterring effort (Bandura, 1986). Fredrickson (2003) also offers sentiments in her broaden-and-build theory, suggesting that positive emotions can help employees foster the resilience they need to make progress during a crisis (Fredrickson *et al.*, 2003). Thus, people may feel calm and happy that they are able to work from home and maintain employment, spurring productivity. For example, employees may feel unburdened by having fewer distractions and interruptions as are common when working in person, which could explain the surge in journal submissions among male academics in particular (Flaherty, 2020).

Of course, these ideas likely represent an overly simplistic view of emotions felt during COVID-19. For instance, someone may feel anxiety *and* happiness simultaneously—people who are working from home with children could feel happiness having more time with their children, yet anxiety about whether to send their children back to school or daycare. Likewise, people who are content and pleased working from home could still feel sad about missing their morning coffee ritual with their colleagues, because such rituals lead to positive moods (e.g., Methot *et al.*, 2020). These simultaneous feelings are indicative of *emotional complexity*, where individuals feel positive and negative emotions that differ in valence at the same time or in a sequential manner in relation to a specific target or event of interest (Fong, 2006; Rothman & Melwani, 2017). Regardless of the form, emotionally complex states allow individuals to thrive in challenging circumstances, as these states signal that one's environment is safe *and* uncertain, fostering adaptation and driving action so that goals are attained (Rothman & Melwani, 2017; Rothman *et al.*, 2017; Vogus *et al.* 2014). Indeed, Rothman and Melwani (2017) theorize that states of emotional complexity are likely to arise when there are “emotional ups and downs, peaks and valleys, and ebbs and flows” (p. 259), all of which are likely for employees during COVID-19.

In pursuing the topics that Rudolph *et al.* (2021) lay out, emotional complexity is likely to play a key role. For instance, healthcare workers who face challenging job demands and conditions (e.g., lack of personal protective equipment or working in hospitals where crisis care has been evoked) are likely to feel heightened fear as they expose themselves to the people with the virus, yet also feel gratitude for their coworkers who are with them and community members who are celebrating them. These feelings of gratitude may provide healthcare workers the resilience they need to cope with their fear, allowing them to provide high-quality care. Likewise, individuals who work in the technology sector but hold precarious “gig” positions may feel optimistic about the technology-related opportunities that our new way of working has brought, but also envious of their peers and family members who have more stable careers. As a final example, as the end of the summer of 2020 approaches, teachers and professors may feel excited about the prospect of interacting with their students in person, but anxious about how they will enforce mask use and social distancing among their students. For example, as one Penn State instructor wrote: “as for me, I love teaching. I love watching metaphoric LED bulbs illuminate over students' heads when a concept sinks in . . . but as much as I love brick-and-mortar teaching, I shudder at the prospect of teaching in a room filled with asymptomatic superspreaders” (Kellerman, 2020). Thus, capturing how emotions are *jointly* experienced is a crucial means to understanding how working during COVID-19 affects employee health, motivation, and performance.

Studying the ebb and flow of emotional complexity during COVID-19

Emotional reactions fluctuate and evolve over time (Weiss & Beal, 2005). Indeed, as employees engage in active sensemaking surrounding working during the pandemic or obtain new information about the pandemic itself (e.g., new state closures or restrictions, new information about the virus), their reactions are likely to evolve. This resonates with a point noted by Rudolph et al. (2021) when they stated that within-person research methods (e.g., experience sampling) are likely fruitful for determining the effects of COVID-19 on work—and relatedly, emotional complexity—over time. Take, for example, the initial stay-at-home orders presented across the United States in March 2020. Originally, employees may have felt anxiety and uncertainty as their work changed, paired with happiness as they were afforded the opportunity to spend more time at home with loved ones and reconnect with others via Zoom (Evans, 2020). However, as states have rushed reopening or had to shut down work again months later, these joint feelings may evolve to frustration and gratitude, as employees want to return to “normal,” but feel thankful that they are home and protected from the newest surge of COVID-19. Likewise, what once began as feelings of hope that the pandemic would wane during summer allowing for a return to work may evolve into feelings of doubt as people process that the numbers are not declining.

Adopting within-person methods affords the best opportunity for researchers to capture emotional complexity beyond static affective dispositions individuals may have (Gabriel et al., 2019). When designed carefully, scholars can thoroughly examine how quickly emotions and their subsequent self-regulatory effects unfold. As noted by Beal and Gabriel (2019; see also Monge, 1990), scholars can combine within-person designs (e.g., daily, weekly, and monthly) in an effort to identify the temporal nature underlying organizational phenomena. For example, it is possible that healthcare workers’ emotional complexity will not change—as healthcare systems are likely to be burdened for the foreseeable future, their feelings of hope and doubt may stay at higher, more stable levels (i.e., shift less over time) compared with individuals in less precarious occupations. On the other hand, there is also considerable regional variability in positive cases and deaths due to the virus, and there have been large shifts over the course of the pandemic—what healthcare workers in the Northeast were experiencing in spring 2020 in terms of COVID-related workload and experienced emotions was later experienced in California and the Southwestern US., and later parts of the Southern US.

With these shifts in emotional complexity, it is likely that scholars would be able to help understand the beneficial *and* detrimental states that come with this experience. Rothman and Melwani (2017) note that emotional complexity should help broaden cognitive and behavioral repertoires that make people more adaptable during challenges—it can make them seek more information, broaden their attention span, or increase motivation to seek more balanced perspectives. Thus, during the pandemic, emotional complexity may allow employees to be more flexible and creative (e.g., when healthcare providers shifted to telehealth). However, emotional complexity can also make people experience more doubt or lead them to procrastinate, and we must consider the possible well-being costs. Indeed, emotionally complex states can lead people to be more reactive to environmental stimuli (Beal & Ghandour, 2011) and exhibit poorer adjustment and well-being (Koval & Kuppens, 2012). Thus, delineating how emotional complexity can be of benefit or detriment during the COVID-19 pandemic will be crucial.

Our complicated conclusion

By now, we hope readers are convinced that (a) COVID-19 has emotionally complex outcomes, (b) people sequentially and simultaneously experience emotions of positive and negative valence, and (c) these complex emotions shift over time. Studying these effects within COVID-19 would prove both fruitful and challenging. Yet, what has made this period fascinating (and upsetting) is that, especially in the US., there are many emotion-provoking events occurring all at once: the

death of more Black citizens at the hands of White policemen; protests and riots; lawful and unlawful removal of relics representing racism, slavery, and the confederate South; a rollercoaster of immigration policies from the supreme court upholding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to former President Trump suspending the H1-B visa program; increased division of American people along political lines; and controversies about mask wearing and reopening of nonessential businesses. Thus, 2020 will be a year we all remember—because of all of these events and because of the emotional complexity experienced as a result.

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Cite this article: Gabriel, AS., Ganster, ML., Slaughter, JE., and MacGowan, RL. (2021). The emotional complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and organizational life. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *14*, 85–89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.7>