Editorial

Taking control amidst the chaos: Emotion regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic☆

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a major global health crisis that continues to threaten public health and safety. Although the pandemic is still unfolding, measures to reduce the spread of the virus have spawned significant challenges to people's current work as well as their careers more generally. In this commentary, we discuss the implications of COVID-19 for maintaining one's psychological well-being and employment security, and also managing family and work responsibilities. We also bring forth evidence from the emotion regulation literature to help mitigate the downstream negative consequences of COVID-19 on people's work lives. Finally, we offer several suggestions for future scholarly investigation into how this pandemic impacts vocational behavior.

The world has been rocked by the emergence of a novel coronavirus (referred to as COVID-19), which continues to wreak havoc worldwide. It has been characterized as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) as the number of confirmed cases and associated fatalities continue to rise. This ongoing global health crisis, along with worldwide efforts to contain the virus' transmission by "flattening the curve", have not only resulted in unparalleled impact on human health and the global economy but also introduced unprecedented challenges for the working lives and careers of millions of people. For example, the International Labor Organization (2020) estimates a significant reduction of work hours in the second quarter of 2020 worldwide, in the order of 10.5% or the equivalent of 305 million full-time workers, along with a higher year-end projection of unemployment.
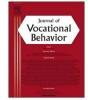
In this commentary, we draw upon existing organizational research to focus on some of the work and career challenges imposed by COVID-19 and discuss how working individuals can remain resilient in responding to this unprecedented pandemic. The goals of this commentary are three-fold. First, we focus on three broad and inter-related challenges that likely befall many working individuals. Second, we draw from careers and psychological research to discuss various emotion regulation strategies that may help effectively manage these career-related challenges. Finally, we offer suggestions for future scholarship on the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to emotion regulation.

1. Career and work challenges associated with infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics

1.1. The challenges of maintaining psychological well-being

Disease outbreaks not only disrupt basic life activities and impede economic growth (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Smith, Keogh-Brown, & Barnett, 2011), they can also elicit both acute and long-term effects on individuals' well-being. In other words, the toll on individuals is not just physical and financial, but emotional as well. Many studies have consistently found relationships between the occurrence of infectious disease outbreaks and a host of psychological and behavioral consequences. Among the negative psychological consequences that have been most frequently reported are greater incidence of depression and psychological distress (Bai et al., 2004 Bults et al., 2011; Jones & Salathé, 2009; Shultz et al., 2016), worry (Thompson, Garfin, Holman, & Silver, 2017),

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functional impairment (Thompson et al., 2017), anxiety about being infected (Horney, Moore, Davis, & MacDonald, 2010; Jehn, Kim, Bradley, & Lant, 2011; Rubin, Potts, & Michie, 2010; Leggat, Brown, Aitken, & Speare, 2010), and reduced quality of life (van Hoek, Underwood, Jit, Miller, & Edmunds, 2011) and subjective well-being (Lau et al., 2008). In terms of behavioral consequences, exposure to outbreaks also resulted in preventive behaviors such as improved hygienic practices (Bults et al., 2011; Kiviniemi, Ram, Kozlowski, & Smith, 2011), seeking medical assistance (Lau et al., 2008, Lau, Griffiths, Au, & Choi, 2011) and engaging in social distancing and isolation (Setbon, Le Pape, Létroublon, Caille-Brillet, & Raude, 2011; Wong & Sam, 2010).

The above psychological and behavioral consequences are experienced by the broader workforce but perhaps more acutely by essential workers. In studies focusing on health care workers, they often report concerns about the (non) availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), personal safety, vaccine availability, caregiving responsibilities at home, and prioritizing the well-being of family members (e.g., Damery et al., 2009; Ives et al., 2009; Martin, 2011; Tippett et al., 2010). Psychological distress also occurs as a result of mitigation strategies (e.g., social distancing, home containment, and travel restrictions) aimed to prevent the spread of the disease. For example, in a study of health care workers in a treatment facility during the SARS outbreak, Maunder et al. (2003) reported incidents of professional isolation arising from the use of protective masks and observance of non-physical contact with co-workers reduced morale among health care workers, and refusal to work among administrative and professional staff. Bai et al. (2004) investigated reactions of health care workers and professional staff shortly after 57 health care workers were quarantined due to the SARS epidemic. Results revealed that 20% of the participants reported feeling stigmatized, ostracized and rejected in their neighborhoods due to their hospital work while 9% expressed reluctance to return to work or had thoughts of quitting their job.

Beyond those in the health care sector, in response to disease outbreaks, individuals in many organizations and industries have to endure harsh workplace conditions such as limited availability of social and work support, increased work demands, irregular work hours, inadequate work benefits, and poor access to healthcare (Blake, Blendon, & Viswanath, 2010; Blendon et al., 2008, International Labor Organization, 2020). These challenging work conditions often increase general health complaints such as fatigue, upset stomach, sleeping difficulties and headaches (Matsuishi et al., 2012; Shigemura, Ursano, Morganstein, Kurosawa, & Benedek, 2020). Additionally, school closures and suspension of religious activities (Baum, Jacobson, & Goold, 2009; Berkman, 2008; Cauchemez et al., 2009; Lee, 2020) arising from social distancing measures further exacerbate these adverse psychological difficulties and contributed to serious financial strain (Cauchemez et al., 2009; Chen, Huang, Chuang, Chiu, & Kuo, 2011). Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that disease outbreaks can have pervasive consequences for mental health and well-being across the workforce.

1.2. The challenges of facing an uncertain labor market and work environment

The economic downturn associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has and will likely continue to result in layoffs, downsizing, and involuntary unemployment that threaten the job security of workers across different career stages and across different business sectors, such as hospitality and food services, manufacturing, retail, travel and trade (International Labor Organization, 2020; Morath, Torry, & Guilford, 2020). The labor market conditions resulting from COVID-19 may also substantially alter career trajectories and impede job search strategies among individuals entering the workforce. Those in school-to-work transition contexts as well as younger workers face scarce employment and apprenticeship prospects that not only disrupt formal entry to the labor market but also delay the acquisition of career competencies (Berkman, 2008; Blake et al., 2010; International Labor Organization, 2020). In addition, findings from national surveys involving US workers before and after previous economic downturns show that those who remain employed may experience significant pay cuts, reduction in work hours, and prolonged furloughs while also facing increased work demand and challenging working conditions (Frone, 2018).

Aside from these career and financial impacts, the widespread labor market uncertainty is also associated with many deleterious psychological outcomes (Cauchemez et al., 2009), including increased anxiety and fear about one's future career options and opportunities. Decades of research has demonstrated that involuntary unemployment is associated with poor psychological and physical health (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). Similarly, employed workers may also experience increased anxiety because of the uncertainty they face about the future of their jobs (Rothstein & Talbott, 2007; Shoss, 2017).

1.3. The challenges of managing family and work responsibilities

Since the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting need for social distancing, many organizations have imposed remote work policies that require individuals to work at home (Adalja, Toner, & Inglesby, 2020), gradually blurring the lines between family and work roles (Capitano & Greenhaus, 2018). Simultaneously, the closure of childcare and school facilities force many working parents to abruptly take on full-time child-caring responsibilities and home-school instruction while also adjusting to their new work-from-home arrangements.

The impact of these changes cannot be underestimated, as maintaining family and work boundaries may become more challenging than ever as people now must undertake multiple role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Although permeable family and work boundaries may be beneficial (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006), enacting segmented roles that compete for primacy (e.g., as a parent and as an employee) may lead to inter-role conflict, family-work interference, and emotional strain (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012).

The current lockdowns being imposed by government around the world further exacerbate these challenges as individuals have narrow opportunities to replenish cognitive and emotional resources depleted from fulfilling family and work demands. The need to balance challenging work and family demands not only may cause individuals to underperform in both the work and family domains but can also result in increased emotional exhaustion, stress and burnout (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010).

2. The alleviating effects of effective regulation of emotions

In the face of the challenges outlined above, what can working individuals do to ameliorate the negative consequences which flow from them? Having described the three broad and inter-related circumstances which many working individuals are likely to experience during the pandemic, we now discuss some ideas about the role of emotion regulation in alleviating negative impacts. Psychologists refer to emotion regulation as the process of initiating, maintaining, and modifying one's emotional experience and expression (Côté, DeCelles, McCarthy, Van Kleef, & Hideg, 2011; Gross, 2014). Compelling evidence reveals that effective emotion regulation is not only associated with myriad health and socio-psychological benefits but can also help employees manage many work and career-related challenges (Joseph & Newman, 2010; van der Linden et al., 2017). It is important to recognize and appreciate the power of emotion regulation in the face of the current destructive and disruptive COVID-19.

2.1. Effective regulation of emotions reduces negative emotions and enhances well-being

Effective regulation of emotions is crucial to reducing negative emotions and enhancing well-being both within and outside work. In a study of 260 employed students, Diefendorff, Richard, and Yang (2008) found that employed young adults utilize several emotion regulation strategies to manage their negative emotions, including: a) seeking and reaching out to others to make them feel good; b) keeping oneself busy/working on other things; c) engaging in enjoyable activities to improve one's mood; and d) attempting to solve a problem. However, they also identified an important difference between the most commonly and least commonly reported strategies. The most commonly reported strategies involve an active approach to coping with difficult situations and negative emotions. Conversely, the least commonly used strategies reflect a passive and avoidance-oriented approach in managing difficult situations and negative emotions. This has led the authors to suggest that more proactive, approach-oriented emotion regulation strategies are likely to be more effective in helping employees manage their negative emotions than avoidance-based strategies. In other words, actively taking control of one's emotions, such as attending to one's feelings and actively seeking ways to improve them result in positive psychological outcomes.

In a separate study, based on over 600 weekly dairies completed by over 200 social workers in training, Pekaar, Bakker, van der Linden, Born, and Sirén (2018) found support for these ideas. In their study, students who are training to become social workers in areas such as nursing and addiction care reported reduced stress and enhanced energy during their traineeship when they attended to their own emotional experience at work and initiated efforts to improve their emotional self-care (Pekaar et al., 2018). These research findings suggest that it is important to actively take control of one's emotions during this current pandemic. While there are likely many pressing work and family demands being imposed on workers, regular and active appraisal of emotions – or taking time out to "check in" with oneself – can help prevent individuals from being overwhelmed with stress and succumb to dysfunctional emotions. This in turn would enable employees to maintain psychological health and resilience in the long run.

2.2. Effective regulation of emotions enhances career adaptability

Now more than ever, it is important for individuals to become adaptable and agile with their careers. In order to do so, however, individuals need to draw on both their cognitive abilities and emotion skills to effectively adjust and respond to career challenges and events (Kidd, 2004). Extant research on career adaptability suggests that effective emotion regulation supports workers' capacity to prepare for and to cope with an uncertain and changing job market (Nilforooshan & Salimi, 2016; Puffer, 2011). Specifically, emotion regulation may increase employees' motivation and willingness to plan for their career, take responsibility for their careers and work experiences, and explore their environment for opportunities. Additionally, effective regulation of emotions can also lead to greater confidence in mastering the challenges associated with one's career (Brown, George-Curran, & Smith, 2003).

The positive influence of emotion regulation on career adaptability is especially salient for occupations characterized by low wage and status, short-term work contracts, and limited opportunities for career progression. Coetzee and Harry (2014) reported that those who demonstrate adequate ability to manage their own and others' emotions show increased capacity for planning their vocational future, pursuing their career choices, exploring career opportunities, and minimizing distress associated with career uncertainty.

It is also important to note that being adaptable with one's career may also help employees deal with stress and increase their psychological well-being. For example, in a longitudinal study involving over 1000 Swiss employees, Fiori, Bollmann, and Rossier (2015) found that career adaptable workers experienced less negative affect, which in turn resulted in reduced job stress and high levels of job satisfaction. In sum, these studies suggest that emotion regulation influences how individuals process information and make judgments, which can have important implications for career planning and career decision-making.

2.3. Effective regulation facilitates work-family balance

Effective regulation of emotions can also counter some of the adverse effects of family-work overload on employees' work effectiveness and psychological well-being (Diestel & Schmidt, 2010; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). First, the ability to resist emotional distractions and impulses enables individuals to focus and persist in pursuing difficult goals and recover from emotionally-demanding tasks (Sanz-Vergel, Demerouti, Moreno-Jiménez, & Mayo, 2010). Therefore, employees who can successfully regulate their emotions may be more effective and efficient in completing their work goals despite having to suddenly transition their work to a home environment where many other distractions and demands may exist (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Second, emotion regulation has many social benefits as it facilitates positive social interactions and enhances relationship quality (Gross, 2014). For instance, emotion regulation cultivates empathy,

compassion, and helping behavior toward others (Eisenberg, 2000; Lebowitz & Dovidio, 2015). In multi-wave data obtained from over 100 matched dual-career couples, Chen, Allen, and Hou (2020) found that mindful and empathic dual-career spouses enjoy more positive work-family experiences. Sharing pleasant and positive events with significant others elicits positive affective states that support employee, job and relationship satisfaction (Ilies, Keeney, & Scott, 2011).

Further, in navigating family-work demands, couples who effectively regulate their emotions not only sustain their own well-being but may also provide emotional and instrumental support to their partners (Ocampo, Restubog, Liwag, Wang, & Petelczyc, 2018). In a daily diary study involving dual-earner couples, Hahn, Binnewies, and Dormann (2014) found that employees' psychological recovery and well-being is facilitated by their own and their partners' psychological detachment. Collectively, these studies suggest that emotion regulation benefits the self, and is also likely to crossover to partners and family members, mitigating psychological distress and supporting recovery processes.

3. Future research opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only threatening our physical health, business and the economy, it is also presenting unprecedented challenges for individuals' work and careers. While our commentary has discussed three broad career-related challenges confronting working individuals, we also recognize that the type and range of challenges are likely to change and evolve as the virus continues to spread around the globe and as we learn more about the virus and its potential longer-term impacts on society. Therefore, we believe it is valuable for future research to take a more comprehensive approach to investigating how this pandemic will significantly alter people's career choices, career development, attitudes about work, and work-family dynamics.

Moreover, as the three authors of this commentary are at three different career stages, we face uniquely different challenges related to maintaining our emotional well-being, dealing with job and career uncertainty, and juggling work-family roles. While our commentary did not consider these important differences, we believe it would be valuable for future research to examine how this pandemic may differentially impact the career and vocational behavior of individuals in various career stages. Given previous research showing that minority or disadvantaged workers often bore the brunt of stressful work events (Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015), it is especially important to examine the impact of this pandemic on economically and socially vulnerable groups (e.g., single parents, immigrants, refugees).

While physical mitigation strategies (e.g., social distancing and quarantining) are effective in curbing transmission and protecting human life (Ferguson et al., 2006; Kelso, Milne, & Kelly, 2009), our review of the literature also suggests that these measures could also impose a significant burden on individuals and communities (e.g., Bai et al., 2004; Maunder et al., 2003). As such, in addition to investigating the direct impact of this pandemic on working life, we believe it is also valuable to analyze how various efforts to mitigate the transmission of the virus can indirectly influence people's career and work lives. For example, are some mitigation strategies less harmful on individuals' well-being and work effectiveness? Given the necessity and prevalence of social distancing, what are the affective and behavioral consequences of social distancing for working individuals? Under what conditions does social distancing harm employees' well-being (e.g., the length of time that social distancing measures are in effect)? Are there contextual conditions and personal resources that can buffer the impact of social distancing on well-being? Can social distancing even serve as an opportunity for self-reflection that can potentially facilitate adaptive self-reflection thereby resulting in meaning-making? We believe that answering these contextually-relevant questions would provide us with an in-depth and holistic understanding of how this pandemic is shaping individual's work lives and career choices both in the short and long term.

As we write this commentary and uncover research related to emotion regulation and infectious disease outbreaks/pandemics, we have become aware of the dearth of scholarship that explores the role of emotion regulation in these unsettling times. While the impact of pandemics/global health crises (e.g., SARS outbreak; Avian H5N1 strain; Ebola virus) on individuals' emotional and mental health has been frequently articulated in the literature (e.g., Bults et al., 2011; Maunder et al., 2003; Shultz et al., 2016), most of the research tends to be descriptive (e.g., documenting its deleterious effects on mental health) and prescriptive (e.g., offering ways to cope without testing their effectiveness) in nature. We are not suggesting that the prior work has less value or is insignificant. In fact, these studies serve as a foundation for setting the stage for a timely and pragmatic research agenda that utilizes more rigorous methods and analysis; one that enables us to study more closely and scientifically how working individuals can respond to a pandemic of this magnitude from an emotion regulation perspective. For example, do employees experience different types of emotions in response to this pandemic (e.g., sadness, anger, hopelessness, guilt, or even shame) and if so, why? How do the different types of negative emotions influence people's careers differently? Are there different ways to manage these distinct negative emotions?

Although we recognize that this pandemic might lead to an overwhelming sense of pessimism, thereby taking a toll on one's emotional health, are there any potential silver linings? In particular, what are the roles of positive emotions, such as hope, compassion, kindness, and gratitude, in how we build our resilience? How do communities restore our strength and help us find meaning and connections in these dark times? Lastly, we have discussed the impact of this pandemic on employees' ability to manage family and work demands. While much has been said about how family and work demands can overwhelm and deplete individuals (Nohe, Meier, Sonntag, & Michel, 2015; Shockley & Singla, 2011), family life can also enrich work life and vice versa (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). From this perspective, it would be relevant to examine how employees can learn emotion regulation skills and draw emotional energy from their family members (e.g., spouses) to enrich their well-being and personal effectiveness. Such a future research agenda should help identify a set of evidence-based ideas and practices about how the effective regulation of emotions can function to help employees not only cope, but perhaps even thrive during these challenging times. As we navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that this commentary inspires research efforts to understand the consequences of global health crises such as this one from an emotion regulation perspective.

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