

Business and Society Research in Times of the Corona Crisis

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No crisis in recent history has shaken the world the way coronavirus has. Starting at the end of 2019 in a province in China, it is poised to reach every corner of the world, if it has not already done so at the time of our writing of this commentary (end of March 2020). The spread of this pandemic in the span of a few months is a clear testament that we now live in a global village that is fully interconnected. As cities, states, and countries are locking down and limiting economic activity to the bare minimum, the costs of this crisis to humans, businesses, and societies are just unfolding. Medical researchers are working overtime to find a cure, and economists are attempting to avert a recession. As coeditors of *Business & Society*, we watch these developments and wonder: *What should business researchers and educators do, if anything, besides shifting and adapting their teaching to an online mode?*

The role and relevance of business research in addressing any societal concern is difficult to fathom for many of our colleagues conducting research on mainstream business topics, but it is not so for scholars working on topics at the intersection of business and society. If nothing else, this crisis underscores the fundamental premise of our field: *the interdependence of business and society* (Editorial, 1960). What binds business and society scholars is a central belief that businesses need to consider societal implications of their actions, respond to societal concerns, and play a positive role in society, more broadly.

What the current crisis will eventually mean to individuals, businesses, and societies is very uncertain at the time of this writing and may remain so for a long time to come. Yet, everyone is trying to make sense of and respond to the crisis as it evolves. So, it is only natural that we do the same as business and society scholars. In that spirit, we attempt to dwell on what this crisis means for business and society research and what new questions it raises. Our commentary is neither a definitive nor exhaustive coverage of these issues; rather, it is meant to be a conversation starter among business and society scholars, and hopefully among the broader business research community interested in addressing grand societal challenges (George et al., 2016).

What the Corona Crisis Reveals to Us

The rapid pace at which the virus is spreading and the crisis is growing poses challenges for comprehension, reflection, and assimilation. Furthermore, the validity and applicability of any observations and conclusions are uncertain, given how fast the information is changing. However, as we have read, watched, listened, discussed, and dealt with the crisis so far, we have been struck by the many lessons it holds for business and society scholarship, specifically given the nature of the virus, its effects, and responses to it. We discuss each of these below.

COVID-19 Virus and Business and Society

The virus causing the COVID-19 is similar to viruses in its class of coronaviruses and shares the general properties of many other viruses, but the unique manner in which it has affected us can potentially reveal insights about the nature of the relationship between business and society.

First, this crisis has undoubtedly highlighted the interconnections that we have with our fellow human beings. These connections and interactions that are routine and taken for granted have suddenly become salient and noticeable. The naturalness of the touch (e.g., handshakes, passing of things to one another) and proximity (e.g., in workplaces, concert halls, grocery stores, transport, and restaurants) in our lives have always been part of our direct connection to others around us, but this crisis underscores it.

The interconnections have always meant that the experiences of our fellow human beings also have an effect on us. For example, someone who suffers sickness experiences pain, but those who treat them, comfort them, or simply watch them also experience pain, even if the nature and degree of pain are different (Monin & Schulz, 2009). The coronavirus behind COVID-19 has unraveled these connections and pointed to the fact that no one—no matter how strong and how privileged—is immune from a problem that afflicts their fellow humans because of the many interconnections we share. This clearly goes to highlight the premise of our scholarship that businesses and societies do not operate in isolation, but are interconnected in many ways that we may not always feel, notice, or acknowledge.

Second, in addition to underscoring our interconnections, susceptibility to the virus reveals how equal we are, despite the differences in our age, education, wealth, and many other characteristics. The virus does not spare anyone who comes in contact with it. While the effects of the virus may vary, what appears fairly certain is that individuals are equally vulnerable. Researchers who study economic inequality have long shown that everyone is worse off in

a highly unequal society, no matter how well off one is (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). In other words, a societal problem affects everyone in the society, and no one is immune from it.

Third, the virus causing COVID-19 is new, and thus, a cure and vaccine are not currently available (at least at the time of this writing). However, the virus's behavior is known, as it belongs to a large class of coronaviruses that cause respiratory infections, ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) identified in 2003 and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) first reported in 2012 (World Health Organization, 2019). Yet, the COVID-19 infections and its effects on people have been neither predicted nor predictable. They have occurred as a storm in calm water and spread like a wildfire, indicating that societal problems can affect us in an unpredictable way and escalate rapidly, at least more rapidly than we can imagine or manage.

Finally, the most challenging characteristics of the coronavirus are its invisibility (at least to the naked eye) and its unpredictability (of its mutation). Although these characteristics are shared commonly by all viruses, the coronavirus underscores the invisibility and the speed, given how quickly it mutated to transfer from humans to humans. These characteristics may be paralleled to business/society relationships, in that the link between business and society is often invisible (at least to an untrained eye), and societal problems may mutate and evolve rapidly, changing their shape. For example, poverty may turn into a public health crisis and inequality may turn into a crisis of law and order. In short, the characteristics that propel a virus into a pandemic may be true of other societal issues that grow stealthily, until they become alarmingly public.

Effects of Societal Problems

Prior research has shown that even if a crisis affects everyone, its degree of impact varies. For example, older people and African American people were the most affected due to hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Brunkard et al., 2008). Yet, the coronavirus has highlighted this in a manner no other crisis in the recent past has done, partly because of the way it has affected the entire world. The variation in its effects across societies, populations, organizations, and individuals is stark. While some of these differential effects may be due to the management of responses (as we discuss in the next subsection) or the stage of spread, it is important to take note of these differential effects.

First, although nearly all the world has been affected, European, American, and Western Pacific regions to date have been affected the most in terms of known infections. Even among these regions, at the time of writing, the death

rates as a percentage of known COVID-19 cases vary from 1.4 per cent in Americas to 5.6 per cent in Europe. Within these regions too, death rates vary from country to country, for example, with Germany and Australia reporting fewer deaths (Worldometers, 2020).

Second, even within these countries, the effects vary among demographic groups. For example, men have been affected more than women, and the elderly have been affected more than the young (Worldometers, 2020). Similarly, less educated and frontline workers have been affected more than others, at least in terms of the immediate effect on their livelihoods. Also, workers in the informal sector, particularly in developing economies, seem to be most vulnerable as they tend to be from historically marginalized groups that lack resources and access to institutional infrastructure necessary to tide over the crisis (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020). Although these figures are only beginning to emerge for the current virus, we can expect that COVID-19 will surely have differential effects among the demographic groups within a country.

Third, the differential effects of COVID-19 are clearly evident across industries and organizations. For example, in the short term, airlines, hotel, tourism, and hospitality industries have been hit the hardest. Of course, the health sector organizations are at the forefront of this—dealing with the sick, working to find a cure and a vaccine, and managing the resource shortages while trying to maintain care for non-COVID-19 cases as well. Again, within these industries, some organizations are affected more than the others, and some in these organizations are affected sooner than the others, for example, frontline workers cannot work from home, whereas those in managerial jobs are able to, making the former more vulnerable to job loss than the latter. At the same time, the crisis has benefited some organizations, for example, Zoom videoconferencing and other remote working and online platforms, as well as companies that provide the necessary tools and infrastructure for electronic communication.

Finally, even among the infected individuals, many seem relatively unaffected, whereas some see their lives upended (either due to health implications or due to bearing the costs of the resultant economic crisis), and others are affected fatally (again, due to virus or due to starvation, exhaustion, and mental health). As we write this, a regional finance minister from Germany has committed suicide, suspected to be of worries over the economic crisis, and more than a dozen migrant workers have already died in India due to starvation and/or exhaustion from walking hundreds of kilometers to return to their villages as transportation and state borders have been shut down. Unfortunately, these figures are only likely to go up as millions of people who work in the informal sectors in developing economies try to find work, shelter, food, and health care during the crisis.

Understanding of and Responses to Societal Problems

Given the complex nature of the link between societal problems and communities, businesses, and individuals, and the differential effects of such problems on the latter, the responses to crises vary. The crisis of COVID-19 has generated a wide range of responses by countries, companies, and individuals, of course, informed by different understandings of the sources and consequences of the crisis.

First, countries have differed in their responses to date—from denial to dismissal, and from reactive to proactive. The governments in some countries (e.g., China and Brazil) have initially denied the problem and delayed sharing knowledge and information about the crisis. Some governments (e.g., the United States and United Kingdom) have also initially dismissed the threat as nothing greater than a common flu and advanced herd immunity theories, thus delaying more stringent responses. Some governments (e.g., Singapore and South Korea) have been proactive in managing the crisis by identifying the infected, isolating them, and aiming to contain the spread via social distance measures. In contrast, many others (e.g., India and France) have resorted to complete lockdowns, at times with little to no time for the citizens to prepare. Such swift lockdowns, particularly when imposed by developing countries that are often characterized by high levels of state fragility, may exacerbate the problems for individuals and businesses and also impede their ability to respond to the crisis (Ault & Spicer, 2014).

Second, companies have also differed in their responses—from revising to repurposing to reinventing. Many companies have revised their delivery modes (e.g., online delivery of services, contactless deliveries of goods, social distance measures in stores) as well as organizational practices (remote working, enhanced sanitization). On the other hand, many companies have quickly repurposed their organizations and have begun selling products and services to deal with the crisis. For example, hotels and resorts have turned into isolation facilities and breweries have turned to manufacturing of hand sanitizers. Also, some companies that faced sudden loss of business reinvented themselves to make products that help the millions now working from home. For example, a stage decorations company in Australia began making desks that are easy to assemble and collapse for the benefit of individuals suddenly working from home without suitable furniture. Unfortunately, in contrast, some companies have also attempted to price gauge or hold out their facilities for want of higher price instead of diverting them to provide care to the affected populations. Similarly, high-frequency algorithmic trading and flash traders looking for quick returns continue to exacerbate the stock market fluctuations.

Third, the response of individuals to this unprecedented crisis has been nothing short of astonishing. Some have been engaged in hoarding supplies (e.g., toilet paper and canned and staple foods), panic buying (e.g., masks and sanitizers), harassing others (e.g., people of Asian appearance), conspiracy theorizing (e.g., bioterrorism by China), profiteering (e.g., buying supplies to resell at a high price on Amazon or eBay), and dismissing (e.g., “the virus does not affect vegetarians” or “it is no different than common flu”). At the same time, other people have resorted to inventing (e.g., homemade masks, three-dimensionally [3D] printed face shields) and helping the vulnerable (e.g., forming support networks, feeding the hungry, suspending rent payments, and paying salaries even as work was suspended to limit contact).

In sum, the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the interconnected nature of our lives and the differential effects on individuals, organizations, and societies, as well as their responses to the crisis. Given the unprecedented and unique nature of this context, each of these issues we have highlighted—the nature of problems at the intersection of business and society, the differential effects of crises on individuals, business, and societies, and their varied understandings and responses—contain in them a range of theoretical puzzles and research questions. Any of these can be fruitfully examined by business and society scholars, and some have likely begun such examinations, but we discuss in the next section a few overarching themes that can be pursued by our scholarly community.

What New Themes Arise for Business and Society Scholarship?

As a pandemic that has been compared with an apocalypse, the COVID-19 crisis raises many themes of interest to the scholars of business and society. We briefly touch on three of these themes: learning from the crisis, evaluating organizational responses, and organizing in the future.

First, the current crisis has revealed the great capacity that we have as a society to quickly respond to large scale social problems. Understanding the processes and mechanisms through which such mobilization has occurred can help in developing strategies for future mobilization of resources and support for societal problems. Such efforts can connect business and society scholarship to research streams such as crisis management (Bundy et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2009) and beyond, such as safety studies, development studies, emergency management, and disaster management (Jung & Song, 2015; Marshall & Schrank, 2014). The current crisis also underscores the need to improve global supply chains and figure out ways to bring diverse sets of stakeholders together to collaborate and respond to rapid

increases in demand (Mena & Palazzo, 2012; Soundararajan et al., 2019). Supply chain disruptions caused by COVID-19 have shifted firm-level decisions from cost-savings to procurement of essential goods, particularly in the health care sector, creating a “wake up call” for supply chain management (Choi et al., 2020). Similarly, the crisis underlines the relevance of studying resilience, examining how individuals, organizations, and societies in a socioeconomic system cope with shocks through anticipation, avoidance, or adjustment (Williams et al., 2019). Learning from such responses can be distilled and applied to other grand societal challenges, such as climate change and inequality. For example, the COVID-19 crisis already resulted in innovations related to testing kits, ventilators, and personal protective equipment. The processes that resulted in these innovations can be studied to derive lessons for socially responsive innovations in the future.

Although this is a health crisis, its effect on the global economy is another crisis in and of itself. The current lockdowns, and hopefully a cure and vaccine in the future, will help contain the public health crisis, but the economic crisis might last considerably longer as we have seen in earlier major economic crises (Johnson, 2006). Governments around the world have responded differently to these crises, ranging from providing bailouts to corporations to enhancing social security nets. The value and effectiveness of these responses are questions worthy of scholarly attention. For example, it would be useful to examine the effectiveness of governments indirectly subsidizing employment by providing bailouts to corporations, as compared with directly absorbing the costs of increased unemployment due to layoffs with schemes such as universal basic income. In addition, it will be useful to examine how state fragility and institutional contexts influence the responses of various governments, and the effectiveness of such responses (Ault & Spicer, 2014; 2019). Meanwhile, these developments also underscore the need to reconsider our current economic systems (Adler, 2016; de Bakker et al., 2020).

Second, in the face of crisis, there is a wide range of organizational responses that hold promise as future areas of inquiry to learn about how businesses can respond to broader societal problems. For example, some businesses have reframed their vision and mission in a matter of days and repurposed their organizations to create products and services that prevent or manage the effect of coronavirus infections. It will be instructive to study the characteristics of these organizations and their leaders as well as the processes of sudden shifts. Such studies can generate new insights about organizations that can potentially contribute to alleviating large societal problems, such as climate change (Bansal, 2020). These studies can benefit from drawing on responses to past crises, such as the great depression, wars, and financial crises. Similarly, some organizations have redefined what is essential and

nonessential in their organizations, supported by technology that allows them to reorganize their work. These responses can be useful to study for their swiftness and drastic nature to generate insights on how similar changes can be achieved in the future, thus informing the scholarship on organizational change.

While many organizations have responded to the crisis, some organizational practices have also contributed to the exacerbation of the crisis. For example, the recent shifts in value distribution in favor of shareholders and top executives as well as the shift to contractual employment have raised the precarious nature of employment for many individuals (Bapuji et al., 2018; Bidwell et al., 2013). In the face of a crisis, these individuals (e.g., part-time workers, contract workers, delivery partners) quickly found themselves unemployed as companies attempted to shed costs. Similarly, a shift in compensation practices to offer more direct compensation and less indirect compensation (e.g., sick leave or medical insurance) has meant that a large number of employees were forced to go to work as they were unable to get paid sick leave. Although the costs of these practices to organizations and societies are gaining recognition, the current crisis highlights the societal consequences of employment and compensation practices of organizations (Bapuji et al., 2020).

Third, the sudden and severe adjustments that individuals and organizations have had to make in response to the COVID-19 crisis are likely to have an effect on the future of business. These adjustments have implications for the studies of business models, and particularly the development of alternative business models. Furthermore, they also hold implications for the examination of the purpose of businesses and the role of cooperation in organizations, industries, and societies, which have long worked on the premise of competition, emphasizing the need to further explore different business models (Loorbach et al., 2010; Schaltegger et al., 2016).

The crisis also has revealed the extent to which work can be done in isolation and remotely using technology. These workstyle changes can have an effect on the future of work organization as well as the role of technology in work. As scholars involved in research and education, we have also been forced to adopt our teaching to an online environment. It will be useful to examine whether this will result in more online teaching in the future and how it will change the future contours of business education. Furthermore, it will be useful to study the new pedagogical techniques and assessment tools that will result from this experience and the role of business education in all of this (Gioia, 2002). It may equally be useful to examine the consequences of these developments in terms of surveillance and dependency (Flyverbom et al., 2019).

Now that we have been sensitized to the health risks, some of the current workplace designs might undergo scrutiny. For example, the crisis has highlighted the health implications of open offices where a physical distance of two meters cannot easily be maintained. It is possible that evidence about the employee productivity and wellbeing consequences of such workplace designs might receive more consideration in the future (de Croon et al., 2005). Furthermore, this crisis has shown that the decline in nonmonetary compensation (e.g., health insurance, paid sick leave, fitness incentives) has implications for public health, which in turn affects organizations. It will be interesting to examine whether a change in compensation practices might occur due to the experience of this crisis. In addition, the sudden shift to working from home has implications for mental health and workplace relations, which need to be examined so that appropriate strategies can be devised to manage them in the future (Anderson et al., 2015). Finally, organizational risk mitigation strategies have typically focused on social, political, and economic factors. Given the current experience, it would be interesting to study whether public health emerges as a risk factor that organizations will take into consideration in their future risk assessments.

In sum, the COVID-19 crisis poses huge challenges for society and causes great anxiety for all of us. Yet, it also affords us many opportunities to study the current crisis to draw lessons to address grand societal challenges, assess the role of businesses, and examine the effect of crisis on the future of organizing. As mentioned earlier, many other opportunities also exist to study issues related to the crisis and the effects on individuals, businesses, and societies, as well as their responses to the crisis. Furthermore, many more themes will arise in the near future as the crisis spreads and responses grow. Business and society scholarship, and business research in general, can play an important role here.

In conclusion, the crisis is still unfolding and responses to it are evolving. However, it is evident now that this is an unprecedented crisis that will leave an impact for the years to come in the same manner as similar crises of the past have (Spanish flu, great depression, and financial crisis). The evolving responses have certainly opened our minds and bodies to new possibilities. This crisis, as tragic as it is, introduces an opportunity for (and a responsibility of) the business and society scholarship to lead the world into a renewed relationship between individuals, businesses, and societies. As coeditors, we will be seeking ways to contribute to these debates through scholarship. We will also explore the options for different forms of debate from our community on this crisis, including through one or more special issues, through short articles on our blog (www.businessandsociety.org), as well as through our

social media channels. We hope you join us in this journey of learning, and more importantly, stay safe and take care in these times of global pandemic.

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