Organizational risk and the COVID-19 pandemic.

SOANE, E., FLIN, R., MACRAE, C. and READER, T.W.

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Title: Editorial: Organisational Risk and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Short title: *EDITORIAL: ORGANISATIONAL RISK*

Emma Soane*[1], Rhona Flin[2], Carl Macrae[3] and Tom W. Reader[1]

[1] London School of Economics and Political Science

[2] Robert Gordon University

[3] University of Nottingham

*Corresponding author information: Emma Soane, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, United Kingston (e-mail: e.c.soane@lse.ac.uk).

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Editorial: Organisational Risk and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Reports of a viral pneumonia began circulating in December 2019. COVID-19 was subsequently identified and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation in March 2020. The disease's potency and transmissibility have led to infections and deaths around the globe, with far-reaching effects on organisations and communities. Yet, the effects of the pandemic have been variable, as have national and organisational responses. Such variability has emphasised the social nature of how we position risk in policies and practices by evaluating pandemic risks against other priorities, putting in place interventions for ameliorating harms, and taking steps to learn and reduce the severity and likelihood of future pandemics (Dewi et al., 2020).

The daily management of the pandemic has highlighted a host of challenges for organisations, such as the safety of critical workers on the frontline of care and service provision; mental health and well-being; the nature of work, jobs, and employment; autonomy and flexibility; social connections within and across organisations, and the interplay between work and home (Bapuji et al., 2020). Hence, organisational handling of the pandemic has placed psychology at the forefront of decision-making, social rules, and behavioural interventions (Bavel et al., 2020; Jetten et al., 2020). For example, managers have needed to consider how to balance organisational needs with personal concerns, such as exposure to disease, or fear of vaccines. Employees and contract workers have had to weigh up their fears about illness with their capacity to earn and support themselves and their families (Blustein & Guarino, 2020). Many of the strategies for handling COVID-19 drew heavily on concepts within organisational psychology, such as compliance, safety, norms, and framing. Furthermore, classic issues examined for many years, such as the trade-offs between productivity and safety, and the potential benefits of flexible working, became central to discussions on managing the pandemic (Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021).

The pandemic can be understood as a process of risk handling with organisations playing a central role in conceptualising and managing risk, and members experiencing risk on multiple levels (e.g., as employees, as decision-makers, as carers). Risk has been central to messaging and attempts to change behaviour throughout the pandemic. Moreover, organisations have engaged in collective and rapid culture change exercises that have been, arguably, unheralded in size and success. Millions of employees have become 'risk aware', adhering to new rules, adopting new ways of working, changing priorities, and engaging in behaviours typically associated with high-risk industries (e.g., testing and reporting). Thus, the pandemic raises important and highly consequential questions for risk researchers concerning the predictability of such an event and the extent to which planning influenced its impact.

Risk concerns the uncertain outcomes of activities that are connected with things humans value and objectives where at least one possible outcome is negative or undesirable (Society for Risk Analysis Analysis, 2018). All organisations must accept and cope with some level of risk, however understanding and managing risk can be very challenging for stakeholders and researchers. Not only are risks hard to understand and gauge in the moment, but also future risks are difficult to anticipate, or even be aware of (Hardy et al., 2020). Indeed, businesses are required to simultaneously take risks and remove risks. For example, in aviation, the organisation of hundreds of planes landing and taking off from a single airstrip every day is inherently risky, yet accidents are rare (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Moreover, the framing of risk varies depending on the hazards involved and the situations where decision-making occurs. Trading in financial markets requires risk-taking to generate profits, whereas decision-making in nuclear power plants is intended to minimise risks as far as possible. Such issues are central to the theorising about risk that has been developing over several decades and has gained traction and momentum since the start of the pandemic.

To further extend theorising about risk and organisations, and in collaboration with JOOP editor Professor Julie Gore, we developed our ideas for a collection of studies that draw on experiences of the pandemic and recognise the opportunities it presents to deepen understanding of organisational risk and ways to protect people from harm. In compiling this special section, we represent different theories and voices from the scholarly community. We also reflect the experiences of people living with exogenous hazards and organisational risks. Our intention is to enhance organisational risk narratives by gathering studies that shed light on specific issues and reflecting on their collective contributions.

Given the enormity of the pandemic and its consequences, we appreciate the challenges in studying organisational risk while also being under those same pressures, and we applaud the thoughtfulness, attention and skill that has been focused on developing understanding about the quality of working life during such uncertain times. We are encouraged by the questions at the heart of studies of risk and the pandemic, and by the continued search for humane ways to organise. In continuing to build such insights, we can better serve our communities. In the sections that follow, we consider how the growth of the field has created a foundation for current ways of thinking and then we provide an overview of the studies in this special section.

The development of organisational risk research

Individual-level research

Prior studies have drawn on several traditions to develop theories of connections between risk, people, work, and organisation. One approach to studying risk rests on assumptions about risk as it relates to hazardous phenomena that have physical properties, such as an earthquake, and psychological properties, including the fear and shame created by an abusive supervisor (Peng et al., 2019), or the thrill of a successful entrepreneurial venture

(Nicolaou et al., 2008). Such views about risk are connected with individual-level variability in characteristics, such as personality traits, that influence risk perceptions and behaviours.

Notable progress has been made in the field of personality psychology where much of the research has centred on sensation seeking, a trait with a physiological basis (Aluja et al., 2019) that shapes preferences for novelty, thrills, complexity, and intensity of experiences (Zuckerman, 1994). For example, anti-terror operatives have higher thrill and adventure seeking aspects of sensation seeking than bomb disposal experts, with both groups having higher levels than the general population (Glicksohn & Bozna, 2000). People with high sensation seeking levels are more likely than average to have entrepreneurial intentions (Zhao et al., 2010). Traders high in sensation seeking show high levels of confidence and trading activity (Grinblatt & Keloharju, 2009).

Moving beyond sensation seeking, research shows a personality profile associated with risk taking that comprises low levels of neuroticism (resilience), agreeableness (tough-mindedness) and conscientiousness (spontaneity) along with high levels of extraversion (social dominance and pace) and openness to experience (Nicholson et al., 2005). Such clusters of traits are associated with other outcomes, including lower safety performance (Christian et al., 2009) and medical students' choice to volunteer in healthcare units during the pandemic (Bazan et al., 2021). Moreover, perceptions of CEOs' personality shape the relationships between firm stock risk and shareholder returns, with CEOs who are perceived as risk takers creating a negative risk-return relationship (Harrison et al., 2020).

Studies carried out during the pandemic have examined a range of behaviours, with prior assumptions being upheld in some applications. For example, there is a negative relationship between risk-taking trait profiles and preventive behaviours, such as using a face covering (Thoma et al., 2021). Perceived work safety is associated with higher quality sleep, less negative psychological functioning at work, and fewer patient safety incidents or errors

among Slovenian physicians (Zupancic et al., 2021). Studies of decision processes show that errors and challenges examined in a range of contexts apply to leaders' choices during the pandemic, such as underestimating the exponential growth of infections, misperceiving risks, taking a short-term view, following the herd and not listening to experts (Kunreuther & Slovic, 2021).

Research has also extended psychological models by examining their functioning in the context of the novel threats presented by COVID-19. For example, a study of Canadian workers in a range of jobs early in the pandemic found that potential risk factors (e.g., reduction in income, perceived vulnerability to disease) had negative effects on wellbeing measures that were not reduced by resilience factors (e.g., social support) and highlight needs for mental health support rather than reliance on individual resilience (Coulombe et al., 2020). The pandemic also provides opportunities to challenge previously held notions. For example, a study of the effects of social distancing finds that higher introversion is associated with greater loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Wei, 2020), outcomes that are attributed to introverts' difficulty with adjustment (Davidson et al., 2015), and in contrast to expectations that introverts would fare well in less socially involved situations. The consequences of such individual-level approaches are increasingly refined models of traits, perceptions and behaviours that contribute to achieving beneficial outcomes for individuals as well as more sophisticated managerial practices.

Organisational-level research

At the organisational level, there has been a focus on culture to explain how risks are defined, and how risks shape behaviour. For example, in the field of banking, it is increasingly recognised that failures in large-scale financial organisations, which can have huge implications for the industries and society-at-large, often reflect social dynamics as much as financial decision-making (Tayan, 2016). This is to say, financial risk in banking is

not objective or neutral. Rather, it is bound into the culture of institutions for their 'risk appetite', how they reward and penalise people, the structures they put in place to guide and bound behaviour, and beliefs about what is 'normal practice' (Palermo et al., 2017; Ring et al., 2016). Increasingly, in this field, work on concepts such as safety culture, which largely originates from domains such as aviation and nuclear power, is being considered as useful for understanding how to manage and regulate bank risk (e.g., in terms of building cultures where people can report incidents, where risk management is shaped by a combination of systems and social norms) (Leaver & Reader, 2019).

Studies of culture pertaining to health and issues related to the pandemic have made similar strides in developing understanding (Cahill et al., 2022). For example, in healthcare, 'cutting corners' is risky (e.g., not following a procedure), but not cutting corners brings other dangers if that means that treatments will not be delivered. In such situations, behaviour is influenced by a combination of values, social norms, and beliefs about blame (Dixon-Woods et al., 2009).

Accordingly, research on responses to the pandemic has considered the role of culture and risk management. For example, Spicer (2020: 1737) considered how the "underlying values and assumptions of many organisations seem to have shifted from exploration and creativity towards safety and resilience", with shifts in working culture having a profound impact. The changed work practices, in particular working-from-home, and greater reliance on telecommunication systems, have created new risks and challenges: for instance, influencing how people think and act on safety (Bazzoli & Probst, 2022). Moreover, changed working practices have also impacted workforces, for example in terms of health and well-being (Bouziri et al., 2020).

The variations in country-wide responses to the pandemic have provided insight on the effectiveness of institutions for preparing for risk, and acting effectively when problems

occur (Bryce et al., 2020). Similarly, at an institutional-level, and especially in domains such as healthcare, the effectiveness of individual units and institutions has been distinguished by their planning and risk management of COVID-19, both at the level of team and institutional management (Griffin et al., 2020). Such work highlights the growing importance of concepts such as resilience for risk management, with being able to cope and substantively adapt to hitherto unconsidered hazards being the hallmark of organisations that managed to sustain and recover operations during the pandemic.

The special section

The pandemic has revealed the utility of psychological theories for understanding risk in organisations. To position this special section in relation to the extant literature, we looked at studies published in the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology. Risk has been central to articles focusing on individual and organisational safety e.g., airline safety, (Macrae, 2009); hazard exposure and accident likelihood (Willis et al., 2017); individual-level experiences of work e.g., risk attitudes, (Dickson, 1981); risk of stress, (Vanhove et al., 2016); stress associated with job insecurity, (Pelfrene et al., 2003); and risk-taking and turnover, (Vandenberghe et al., 2011). JOOP has also fostered progress in related fields, with a special issue on well-being, health and performance being published in 2015. Naturalistic decision making was the subject of a special section in the same year that collected studies of team decision processes typically from higher risk domains, with a particular emphasis on developing understanding of naturalistic and descriptive perspectives that examine themes such as the nature of expertise and dealing with fuzzy problem in high-risk contexts (Gore et al., 2015; Klein, 2015).

Taking a wider view of risk within the journal, Kwiatkowski and Duncan's (2006: 217) eloquent argument about organisational psychology draws on the concept of risk to propose that scholars and practitioners of psychology need to maintain a humanistic

orientation to avoid "becoming 'servants of power'. If we focus on technique, we risk becoming technicians. If we ignore the political, we risk powerlessness". The focus on values and purpose, and the risks associated with losing those lodestones, is an approach that still resonates, especially in the context of the pandemic and its devasting consequences. Bakker and Schaufeli's (2008) approach to positive psychology is similarly relevant in its cautioning against a pathogenic perspective on risk factors and diseases, as well as its exhortation that researchers pay attention to understanding ways to achieve the positive promotion of health and well-being.

We build on the tradition of debate about risk, decisions, and organisation in this journal. In issuing a call for papers that examine organisational risk and the COVID-19 pandemic, our aims were to encourage the growth of new lines of enquiry that extend our theoretical knowledge and contribute to a stance that is more integrative and more nuanced. Our intention is to broaden understanding of the concept of risk because doing so has the potential to deepen understanding of many organisational phenomena.

The papers in this special section take us on a journey though the emotions, uncertainties and changes that were hallmarks of the COVID-19 pandemic. They remind us of lived experiences as people navigated their new and challenging situations, and of the organisational changes that were so critical to business continuity. Together, the studies represent a step forward in theorising about risks, people and organisations. Individually, each study provides details on how better to understand risks by using the COVID-19 pandemic to frame debates about emotions, cognitions, behaviours and contexts. Moreover, each of the papers includes participants from a range of organisations which reflects the challenges and opportunities of conducting research through the pandemic and contributes to a broader understanding of risks and organisations. We summarise the research contexts,

theoretical considerations and methods covered in the papers in Table 1 to provide an overview of the studies.

Insert Table 1 about Here

Emotions are a strong theme throughout the papers. The focus on emotions in these studies resonates with the daily experience of working throughout the pandemic. The stories told in the papers create a rich picture by examining positive emotions, such as the much-needed feeling of hope (Shen et al., Forthcoming), negative emotions, such as stress (Eby et al., Forthcoming), as well as the emotions of different communities, notably workers (Eby et al., Forthcoming; Wang et al., Forthcoming) and leaders (Shen et al., Forthcoming). Moreover, the studies draw on previously developed theories of appraisal (Shen et al., Forthcoming; Wang et al., Forthcoming) and gender roles (Shen et al., Forthcoming). The more situation-specific Economic Stress and COVID-19 Occupational Risk model (Sinclair et al., 2021) was the basis for Eby et al.'s study.

Examinations of conditional effects represent a second theme. Each of the studies offers theoretical extensions that contribute to explaining how the pandemic changed personal experiences and the role of organisations in supporting or structuring work. Such extensions provide insights into the boundary conditions of theories. Notably, Wang et al. find that women's supervisory behaviours were less affected by emotions and focused on supporting employees and their families, whereas men's supervisory behaviours were influenced significantly by emotions that increased the likelihood of abusive behaviours. Employees' emotional responses to the business threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic are shaped by perceived social responsibility of HRM practices including training in corporate social responsibility.

The variability of methods used in the studies is a third theme. Although each of the studies takes a quantitative approach, the approaches to data gathering differ. The

applications of these different methods brings the benefits of rigour and experience to the risk domain, while also enabling new insights to be generated. Wang et al. use a multi-wave diary study to gather data from employees over seven working days, with between-participants' data such as socially responsible HRM practices and demographics assessed one month before the diary study of hope, anxiety and insomnia. Doing so does generates data that incorporate some of the variability that may be expected during volatile times and enriches understanding of how pandemic-driven risks to business influence emotions and wellbeing.

Eby et al., also focus on individual-level responses, using a two-wave survey as well as extensive use of Occupational Information Network (O*Net) archival data to develop understanding of the objective risks of contracting COVID-19 alongside workers' subjective risk of contracting the disease while at work. Creating a typology of the riskiness of jobs in terms of their potential to transmit disease is itself a novel achievement that furthers our understanding of jobs beyond the more widely applied health and safety perspective. Comparing this more objective element of work with subjective perceptions takes the long-standing idea that subjective and objective views of risk differ (Ford & Tetrick, 2011; Rice et al., 2022) in a new direction that goes beyond the notion that differences need correction to a more interpretive stance on how differences guide understanding of how to mitigate risks in organisations.

Shen et al. examine leader-follower dyads. Such an approach is familiar within the leadership literature, yet less well used in the risk literature. Focusing of dyads creates opportunities to study the nuances of leaders' experiences of emotions during the pandemic and to deepen understanding of when emotions create supportive connections with employees, and when emotions drive more abusive behaviours. More broadly, examining risk from the perspective of dyadic relationships creates insights into the microclimates where

risks are generated, perceived and responded to, building on the few studies in this area (e.g., Hu et al., 2020; Slaughter et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2021).

Risks are pervasive, so one element of theoretical progression we were keen to see is a multilevel approach to understanding connections between people and organisations. Wang et al. take such a view and develop theorising by showing that the relationship between the effects of business threat due to COVID-19 and insomnia is mediated by employees' daily hope and workplace anxiety and condition upon socially responsible HRM practices. Taking a multilevel perspective such as this is another step towards building a more complete understanding of the microfoundations of organisational risks.

Conclusion

Compiling this special section has involved input from many people. We thank all the contributors and our referees for providing insightful and constructive reviews, particularly given their own challenges arising from working through the pandemic. We are grateful for all the contributions, and we hope that those whose submissions were not selected will continue their studies of organisational risk. It is a rich field with a bright future and one that contributes much to society, as well as to organisations and scholarly endeavours. Special thanks go to Julie Gore, editor of JOOP and Professor of Organisational Behaviour, for inviting us to highlight the importance of organisational risk and to compile this special section. We also thank Hannah Wakley from Wiley and Jeyashree Ramamoorthy from the JOOP office for their unflagging help and support throughout the entire process. Putting together the special section has been stimulating and informative. We have learned much about current approaches to understanding risk as well as the lived experiences of people as they navigate pandemic-related risks and challenges. We hope that our readers are similarly informed and inspired, and that the concept of risk has a new resonance that stimulates further research.

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Table 1

Contexts, theoretical considerations and methods covered in the special section

Contexts	Theoretical considerations	Methods
Range of organisations, China	Workers' emotions, organisational processes and wellbeing	Multiwave diary study
Range of organisations, Netherlands	Leaders' emotions, supervisor behaviours	Leader-follower dyads
Range of organisations, USA	Health and safety, job design, stress and wellbeing	Two-wave survey and archival data