Lessons learned from COVID-19 and the implications for resilience research, policy and practice

1 | INTRODUCTION

This special issue of the Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management aims to consider the early lessons and implications of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic for both the theory and practice of crisis management. The COVID-19 pandemic is essential because it represents the first major global health crisis of the 21st Century, and it also highlights the ‘messy’ nature of those management and policy problems which have the potential to escalate into a crisis and which can highlight the inadequate nature of management responses (Ackoff, 1981; Turner, 1994). Before outlining the aspects of these problems covered in this special issue, we need to highlight some of the challenges associated with the pandemic and its implications for the relationships between the processes of resilience and crisis management.

Challenges associated with crisis management and organizational resilience (along with the linked concept of business continuity management [BCM]) were brought to the centre stage of organizational awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inevitably, an extreme event on the global scale of COVID-19 generates a range of impacts across the organizational and societal landscape. There has been considerable discussion about how some organizations were resilient in the face of the task demands associated with the pandemic. In contrast, others could not respond effectively (see, e.g., Dayson et al., 2021). COVID-19 can be considered an extreme event—a low probability, high consequence event that generated a sense of crisis for many organizations. The move to lockdown and the constraints around supply chains moved many organizations into what could be seen as a crisis state in which they were close to the point of failure, and the pandemic was seen to generate a ‘perfect storm’ of challenges for many organizations to contend with (Hyndman, 2020; Slagle et al., 2021). At the same time, other organizations benefitted from the increased demand to provide protective equipment, develop vaccines and support the means of mobile working. The landscape of costs and benefits associated with the crisis was uneven, and this is particularly apparent in terms of the public health response and the emergence of what has been described as vaccine nationalism (Bollyky & Bown, 2020; Hassoun, 2021; Katz et al., 2021).

The pandemic illustrated the fragile nature of many public health systems in dealing with the shock of an emergent virus and the assumptions that underpinned contingency planning for such events (Gostin, 2022; Parmet, 2022). One of these early assumptions was the need for herd immunity to deal with the transmission of the virus, a concept that has been subject to criticism within the public health community (Ashton, 2022). More recently, politicians have spoken of the need to live with the virus, and, in the United Kingdom, most of the COVID restrictions have been (or are due to be) lifted by the various devolved governments (Vaughan, 2022). In commenting on such political responses, and as an extension of the opposition to herd immunity as an intervention strategy, Ashton (2022) goes on to argue that:

More recently, the dominance of politics over science as manifested by the rush to abandon all non-pharmacological virus control methods have led to the emergence of a dominant domestic narrative that the pandemic is all but over bar the shouting. The assumption has been spreading that in future COVID-19 will only be of nuisance value on a par with the flu - , p. 77.

COVID-19 also highlighted the role played by information in forming a robust response to such emergent problems as well as the continued problems of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Islam et al., 2020; Laato et al., 2020). Those challenges around disinformation and conspiracy theories were also an additional problem that healthcare organizations had to address, especially in terms of undermining technical expertise by populist views (Fischbacher-Smith, 2021; Lasco & Larson, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2022). This generated additional challenges for the public health system, especially vaccine hesitancy, which added to the existing challenges around vaccine inequalities (Bassey, 2022). The rise of medical populism (Lasco & Curato, 2019; Lasco, 2020) also seems to have undermined those with technical expertise and who were charged with developing public health responses. It is likely to remain a problem for the foreseeable future, and it has the potential to incubate further vulnerabilities around the abilities of government and regulatory agencies to communicate a clear message in the face of future crises, especially within the context of social media as a conduit for false or misleading information.

Taken together, such an approach would seem to offer the potential for the incubation of further problems without addressing some of the core challenges that the pandemic generated for governments and organizations who sought to manage both its immediate task demands and the associated vulnerabilities that the
virus exposed. While herd immunity could be seen as a potentially flawed approach due to the emergent nature of the virus, it points to the issue of how societies can develop a degree of long-term resilience to the threat. On the other hand, immunization could be seen as a crisis management response to develop active strategies for intervention and response actively. The subtle distinctions between the two approaches could be seen to speak to some of the debates around the characteristics and associated relationships between resilience and crisis management approaches.

2 | CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE

The question of how to respond to a range of perturbations facing an organization will vary depending on the situational context in which the organization operates, its abilities to absorb and adapt to the task demands of the shock event, and the agile nature of the management processes and practices within the organization. The development of much of this capability can be considered to take place before such shock events in what has been termed the crisis of management phase (Smith, 1990, 1995). This planning and awareness phase of crisis management is well-established within the literature. For example, Turner (1976, 1978, 1994) set out the processes by which organizations could incubate the potential for failure within their processes and practices. Reason termed these incubated elements as latent conditions (Reason, 1990a, 1990b, 1997) and identified several ‘source types’—awareness, commitment and competence—in shaping the nature of the failure process (Reason, 1990c).

One of the more recent challenges facing managers in dealing with extreme events concerns how many of the critical terms used—such as risk, crisis, and resilience—can be seen to have different meanings within different situational contexts. For example, in discussing the nature of the term ‘risk’, Dowie (1999) argued that it had become a conceptual pollutant. Being common to discourses of all kinds and levels, it encourages people to assume that they know what they are talking about when they use it—but, much worse and much more significant, to assume that they know what others are talking about when they hear or see it used. It is a highly dangerous chimera which can be dispatched without loss (p.42).

In some respects, similar criticisms could be made of the term ‘resilience’ as various perspectives on the terms generate ambiguities around their meaning in practice (Gunderson et al. 2002; Holling & Gunderson, 2002). Resilience can be seen to have three originating sources within the academic literature: engineering (where it is seen as bounce back), psychology/counselling (where the focus is on the resilience of individuals within a community setting), and systems biology (where the adaptation within an environmental setting allows for the response to emergent conditions). In many respects, resilience has much in common with the crisis management literature in that it moves beyond the crisis response phase to include Mitroff et al. (2004), for example, argue that crises are essentially ill-structured problems and echo Ackoff’s (1973, 1981) framing of such problems as messes. COVID-19 would undoubtedly meet the criteria of an ill-structured problem.

First, it emerged as a new form of coronavirus, and, while part of the same family as middle east respiratory syndrome and severe acute respiratory syndrome, it had different characteristics in terms of its transmissibility and impact on those humans exposed to it. Second, it also evolved throughout the pandemic, and each mutation generated slightly different symptoms within the Omicron variant, seeming to be the least fatal. Third, there was no vaccine for the virus, and these had to be developed quickly and at scale. This generated a series of technical issues around meeting production targets that subsequently developed into political problems, notably between the United Kingdom and the European Union (EU) over access to vaccines produced by Astra-Zeneca (Eaton, 2021). Fifth, some countries have developed their contingency plans based on an influenza pandemic and not a Coronavirus, and calls have been made to rethink the planning process to recognize the limitations of our abilities to predict emergent public health problems (Stephen, 2019). Stephen (2019) argues that the impacts of climate change may well decrease our abilities to determine the risk of future outbreaks due to emergence. Finally, there is the issue of what has been termed ‘long COVID’ and the ongoing search for a cure (Marshall, 2022). At its core, the challenges generated by COVID-19 point to the paradox at the core of the risk analysis process. The demand for reliable assessments of uncertainty will always exceed the abilities of the range of calculative practices to determine risk (as measurable uncertainty) (Fischbacher-Smith, 2022).

The multilevel nature of the COVID-19 pandemic fits within the nature of the messes that Ackoff (1979, 1981) referred to. In developing Ackoff’s arguments, Mitroff and Kilmann (2021) define the nature of such messes as:

a whole system of problems that were so interconnected such that one couldn’t take any single problem out of the Mess and attempt to analyze and manage on its own without doing irreparable damage both to the fundamental nature of the problem and the larger Mess of which it was an integral part. The point is that the interconnections between the problems that constitute a Mess are not only one of its key defining properties, but are as important as the problems themselves. (p. 21)

The political and public health responses to COVID-19 highlighted the interconnected and multifaceted nature of the pandemic, along with the associated challenges facing policymakers and public health officials. Such issues would be considered ‘wicked problems’ from a policy perspective (Rittel & Webber, 1973), and Mitroff (2019) merged this concept with Ackoff’s notion of ‘messes’ to generate the
construct of a 'wicked mess'. Such wicked messes serve as an amalgam of the previous two terms in which the problem space is essentially unbounded, emergence generates additional problems as a result of interventions, and the elements of the problem space are essentially interconnected. The responses to COVID-19 illustrate the interconnected and essentially unbounded nature of the problem. It transcends virtually every sphere of public life, and interventions in one part of the problem space (such as lockdowns to contain the spread of the virus, vaccine distribution and travel constraints) have significant implications elsewhere (economic performance, social unrest, education and international relations). If we add to the wicked nature of COVID-19 as a policy mess the challenges around inadequate preparation for extreme events and the ambiguities around what is meant by resilience (and, for that matter, crisis), then we have a perfect storm of confusion regarding our abilities to learn practical lessons from the pandemic. This has become a core challenge for those of us working in crisis management and resilience, and this special issue aims to begin a dialogue within the shadow of what COVID-19 means for both theory and practice.

2.1 Outline of the special issue

This special issue focuses on the nature and extent of organizational learning arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The papers included here present evidence and lessons that arose from the strategic assumptions made at the individual, organizational and policy levels and their impact on policies that sought to overcome the challenges and task demands of the pandemic. In essence, an evaluation of these responses remains a work in progress and the article included here provide an initial assessment of the issues and associated problems. Seven papers are presented here and which highlight the various approaches to managing a crisis on a global scale but which had local consequences. Throughout the pandemic, there has been much discussion within policy circles about the extent to which government and organizational systems were resilient to such shock events. The papers in this issue highlight some of the key attributes of strategic resilience in response to a crisis. These include adaptability at the organizational and policy levels; the development of capabilities for emergent learning and the generation of creative solutions; effective planning and resource prioritization and emotional support to manage the stress levels associated with crisis management, specifically for operational actors or frontline workers.

2.2 Adaptable

Julia Graham and Hoe-Yeong Loke (this issue) commented on the challenges of a siloed approach and the disconnect between strategic risk, operational resilience and response strategy to crisis and business continuity emanating from threats posed by COVID-19. They argue for the need for continuous adaptation in the face of crisis, partly due to crisis timeline loops back, to take a more strategic and proactive approach to resilience. The adaptive characteristic has long been seen within the literature as a critical attribute of building resilience to perturbations facing an organization; see, for example, Luers et al. (2003) and Walker et al. (2004). Adaptive capacity is seen by Luers et al. (2003), to be different from adaptation, as adaptive capacity is the ability to continuously adapt to the changing situational context that enables an organization, to facilitate transition or transformation into a new state of being as a means of mitigating risk (see also, Klein et al., 2003). Human, financial and infrastructural resources combined with a collaborative and learning culture are seen as critical factors required to develop organizational adaptive capacity (Engle & Lemos, 2010; Gupta et al., 2010).

2.3 Emergent learning and creative solutions

According to Steen and Ranningsbakk (2021), emergent learning is different from planned learning and is key to solving immediate problems during a crisis. They define 'emergent learning as learning derived from problem-solving and decision-making activities in response to immediate problems' (p. 159). Riana Steen, Geir Haakonsen, and Riccardo Patriarca, (this volume) highlighted the challenges around standard emergency-management procedures and the inflexibility that this may create in a crisis, primarily when these interact with over planning and poor resource allocations. This article highlighted the significance of emergent learning, creative problem solving, and individual and collective efforts in strategic response to a crisis. Learning in today's environment is essential as the nature of interconnected societal means that the work environment is often too complex and fast-changing to give any room for planned learning. When combined with creative improvising, transparency and building stakeholders' relationships, these factors were shown to strengthen flexibility and resilience in emergency-management systems.

2.4 Human dynamics of crisis: Directional and emotional support

One of the challenges around multilevel adaptation in a crisis is that it can often lead to role conflict (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; Kalliath & Morris, 2002), generating stress in crises. Nicolas Lot and Cecilia De la Garza, in their article titled 'The socio-organizational and human dynamics of resilience in a hospital: the case of the COVID-19 crisis', set out enabling and inhibiting factors of organizational resilience in crises. They argue that organizational resilience is an interactive process between anticipation and adaptation, taking account of demands, constraints and available resources and expertise. The authors highlighted heightened stress levels, emotional labour associated with crisis, and the need to support operational actors. Surabhi Sahay, Ralph A. Gigliotti, Maria Dwyer, and Weixu Lu, (this volume) further highlighted some of the challenges (such as role conflict) that operational actors face in a crisis. In this article, a critical evaluation of how stress levels are heightened among operational
actors or frontline staff as they improvise or job craft to meet the task demands are undertaken. The authors’ call is to provide necessary resources, role direction and training to enable employees to adapt effectively in a crisis. Robinson et al. (2022), following their study on the experiences of registered nurses (RNs), call for the need to involve frontline staff in communication with senior management and the planning process as a means of progressing from a state of perseverance to where they can build resilience to stressors.

2.5 Effective planning and resource prioritization

Emma Lotte Willems, Stijn Van Puyvelde, Marc Jegers, and Peter Raeymaeckers (this volume) set out the pressures and responses of nonprofit organizations in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic drawing on the resource dependence and stakeholder theories. The study findings reveal that in the face of decreasing financial support, there was increased planning, financial stability protection, and adapting operations at the activity levels of the board and managerial executives. To build the operational resilience of the supply chain in a crisis, Nidal Youssef Dwaikat, Saad Zighan, Moheeb Abualqumboz, and Ziad Al-Kalha, (this volume) set out a 4Rs framework—involving, retooling, repurposing, recalibrating, and reconfiguration—to guide decision making around building supply chain resilience.

Effective planning and prioritization of resources are critical in a crisis, as the sudden lack of resources can generate problems around needed capacity in terms of available expertise, space and financial resources; see, for example, Stephens et al. (2020). Vitalis Nakrošis and Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, (this volume) highlighted the value of the logic of appropriateness and the rational logic of consequentiality in managing a crisis. They explain that the logic of consequentiality strengthens resilience in an emergency, while the logic of appropriateness sustains resilience.

Taken together, these articles highlight the value of people in leadership and decision-making and the expertise brought to bear when making decisions in times of radical uncertainty (King & Kay, 2020). Carley and Harrald (1997) explain that organizations learn from a crisis by experience to improve contingency planning. Furthermore, training and exercises are seen as critical elements for crisis preparedness, see, for example, Walsh et al. (2015) and for improving the understanding of causes, impacts and solutions (Braut & Njå, 2013; Kuipers & Welsh, 2017). This emergent learning during a crisis allows for a reconfiguration of systems (a combination of people, resources and knowledge) in creative ways to solve problems in a very complex and fast-changing work environment (Desai, 2010). However, it should be noted that there are seen to be a number of barriers to organizational learning, including within the management of healthcare (Smith & Elliott, 2007) and it remains to be seen whether governments and organizations will learn the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The papers in this special issue also provide an initial perspective on the specific impact of COVID-19 in terms of the theoretical and practical aspects of both crisis management and resilience. They also discuss the challenges of developing a unified theoretical perspective that integrates the two terms. It would seem clear that COVID-19 will continue to be a source of debate within the crisis literature for some time to come.

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