

# *Toward a strategic approach to studying COVID-19 pandemic*

Article

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## Toward a strategic approach to studying COVID-19 pandemic

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this introduction is fourfold: 1) to articulate the reasons for the special issue; 2) to highlight some of the fundamental issues related to the management research on COVID-19; 3) to introduce the authors and to summarize their contributions to this special issue; and 4) to provide some suggestions for future research pertaining to global challenges and business in general.

### **Design/Methodology/Approach**

This article introduces the special issue by addressing the following four points related to the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) conceptualization of the crisis, 2) the role of organizations, 3) challenges of the global pandemic, and 4) business-society relationships. We briefly relate the papers in this special issue to these four points and we conclude with some thoughts on how to move forward on research in this domain.

### **Findings**

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be one of the most important challenges to mankind and to organizations in recent years, and many organizations have proven to be very resilient in the face of this. Effective leadership, communication with stakeholders, global organizations, and new organizational forms such as cross-sectoral collaborations have all proven important in dealing with this crisis. They will also likely be important for dealing with even more serious crises in the future such as climate change and other challenges referred to in the papers in this issue.

### **Originality**

This paper provides an overview and summary of the implications of the papers in this special issue. As such, its originality derives mostly from the originality of the papers contained in this special issue.

### **Keywords**

COVID-19 pandemic; cross-sectoral collaborations; global organizations; stakeholders; corporate social responsibility (CSR); climate change; new organizational forms.

## **Introduction**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most devastating and challenging crises to confront our planet in modern times. As such, this pandemic has taxed the resources and creativity of nation states as well as that of organizations at the local, regional, national, and international levels. These organizations, in turn, have responded with many novel and innovative approaches to address this crisis. This special

issue of the *Journal of Strategy and Management* explores the managerial and organizational implications of this crisis and the efforts of organizations to address it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the daily lives of most people on this planet, and we have seen dramatic consequences of it in terms of health and mortality figures, economic decline, and social disruptions. According to the World Health Organization (2021), there have been over 181 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 3.91 million confirmed deaths due to COVID-19 as of July 1, 2021. The actual numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths are, however, likely to be far higher than these figures. With the health care establishments of many countries stretched to and beyond capacity, many COVID-19 cases and deaths have likely gone undiagnosed. In addition, it is very likely that a great many individuals with other serious and life-threatening illnesses and injuries either avoided hospitals and other health care facilities due to fear of contagion or were crowded out by COVID-19 patients. These factors undoubtedly resulted in numerous deaths that would unlikely be attributed to COVID-19 in official counts.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2021), the world economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has been the worst recession since the end of World War II. The IMF reports a 3.4% decline in world economic activity associated with this recession. Coupled with the disappearance of the 3.5% projected world economic growth anticipated prior to the onset of the pandemic, this represents a nearly 7% loss in world economic activity in 2020. As a result of this economic downturn, the IMF reports that 95 million individuals fell below the extreme poverty benchmark. Nevertheless, the IMF suggests that the recession could have been far worse

had it not been for quick and decisive economic policy actions taken by national governments. In fact, it speculates that the decline could have been three times as serious.

In addition to the measurable health and economic impacts of COVID-19, there have been very serious disruptions of social life among families, friends, work groups, and social, religious, political, and other organizations. The United Nations (2020) in a report on COVID-19 indicated that the pandemic is the worst health care crisis in the 75-year history of the UN and that it “is attacking societies at their core”. It further notes that the adverse social impacts of COVID-19 are worst for those who are least well off, leading to greater income inequality. It specifically cites the elderly, youth, those living in poverty, individuals with disabilities, and indigenous people as being the most adversely affected. Moreover, the IMF notes that the disruption of schooling will likely lead to greater inequality in the future.

Organizations all over the world have responded to the pandemic in myriad of ways including through many new and inventive approaches. Concurrently, there have been scholarly attempts to clarify and investigate the causes and consequences of the crisis, spanning various disciplines from medicine and biology, history and social sciences, to administrative or management sciences. These attempts have taken three forms. First, there have been major books on the topic from scholars from different disciplines, e.g., sociology (Lupton & Willis, 2021), history (Ferguson, 2021), economics (Ganz, 2021). Second, there have been numerous scientific papers published in peer-reviewed journals, especially in medicine and biology (e.g., see special issues in the *Journal of Clinical Medicine* and the *Journal of Personalized Medicine*). Third, there

have been calls for special issues in peer-reviewed journals in management disciplines, and during the past several months we have witnessed numerous calls for special issues in empirically oriented journals. This genre represents special issues in organization behavior and human resource management (e.g., "*Leadership and Employees' Performance on the Verge of a New Era?: The Challenges Brought by COVID-19 on Workplaces*, " in *Administrative Sciences*), operations management ( e.g., "*Covid-19: Operations Management Practices Holds Key to Recovery*"), risk and insurance (e.g., Special Issue on the Implications of COVID-19 for the Insurance Industry), management education (e.g., *The Impact of COVID-19 on Management Learning and Education: Perils and Possibilities* in the *Academy of Management and Learning and Education*), business and society (e.g., "COVID-19 and Business and Society Scholarship," in *Business & Society*) and general management journals such as *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* or the *British Journal of Management*.

Against this backdrop, a valid question can be raised: why should the *Journal of Strategy & Management* attempt *another* special issue? The answer to the question hinges on two crucial assumptions that have preoccupied us as the special issue editors. First, it is unclear to us if quality data is available that can inform our conclusions about possible cause-effect relationships. Unlike basic scientific disciplines such as medicine, where tracking of viruses is quite common, we are not persuaded such efforts are common in management related fields. Second, we are also not sure if we know enough about the organizational and managerial implications of the impact of the virus to raise meaningful questions and hypotheses about the phenomenon. Under these conditions, several epistemological paths can be followed. For one, we could adopt a strategy of

knowledge growth through extension (Weick, 1989) where existing theories are used to develop and test hypotheses in a novel context. We suspect many of the works in press (including special issues) will follow this strategy. Second, some researchers may adopt a discovery orientation, and engage in understanding the phenomenon in its own habitat, and we suspect their endeavors are likely to be labor intensive and (publication) time delayed.

We propose a third strategy: one of stepping back and asking how we should proceed to unravel the causes and consequences of this crisis for *managerial* issues. In this strategy, we adopt a middle ground: We know something about the virus (unlike the position of qualitative researchers), but not yet enough to embark on well-defined research programs (unlike the practitioners of Weick's strategy). Thus, as editors, we have built this special issue on a presumption of humility, oriented to answer the question: How do we go about studying the COVID-19 crisis so that we can generate reasonable conclusions and prescriptions about this and similar crises?

One advantage of the strategy is that it helps avoid the trap of foreclosing potentially fruitful avenues of research. Thus, we recognize that there are likely to be diverse paths that fit this strategy. To accommodate (or to underscore) the potential diversity, as well as putting out an open call we contacted a number of senior scholars, to provide us their perspectives on the crisis. The invited authors are not merely reputed scholars but each in their own way has distinct perspective to provide the needed diversity. The invited papers like any other paper were subject to peer review and those published in this special issue underwent a number of modifications. The invited scholars (in alphabetical order) include:



- Professor John Camillus, currently Donald R. Beall Endowed Chair in Strategic Management at the Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh, has witnessed the evolution o/f strategic management field over four decades, a time during which the field, once exclusively promoted by Harvard Business School, became widely diffused in the US. Building on his book on *Wicked Problems*, Camillus and his coauthors develop the notion of wicked problems in the context of COVID-19 and offer a transdisciplinary view of research possibilities in this domain. His paper is co-authored with Dr. Shoba Ramanadhan and Dr. Krishnan Ganapathy. Ramanadhan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Her research supports community-based organizations to improve health equity through the implementation of evidence-based programs. Much of her work uses participatory approaches. Dr. Krishnan Ganapathy is Director of Apollo Telemedicine Networking Foundation, a Past President of the Telemedicine Society of India, Neurological Society of India, and the Indian Society for Stereotactic & Functional Neurosurgery. He is an Honorary Distinguished Professor at the Tamil Nadu Dr. M.G.R. Medical University. He is acknowledged to be one of the Founding Fathers of Telehealth in India.
- Archie Carroll served for forty years in the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia where he filled a variety of roles including department head, associate dean, and Robert W. Scherer Chair of Management. He was one of the early pioneers of the fields of social issues in management and business ethics and he served as Chair of the Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management and President of the Society for Business Ethics. Carroll's paper uses his widely-cited four-dimensional (i.e.,

economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary) model of corporate social responsibility to analyze corporate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- John G. Grant was a member of the faculty of the Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh for 25 years, serving in several different capacities including Director of the MBA Program and the Robert Kirby Professor of Strategic Management. Dr. Grant subsequently worked as an executive in the pharmaceutical industry and served in visiting positions at the University of Northern Colorado and Colorado State University. His co-author, Thomas Wunder, is Professor of Strategic Management at the Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences in Bavaria, Germany, where he is leading the major "Strategy, Entrepreneurship & Sustainability" in the Master of Advanced Management program. Prior to this he served as a strategy consultant with Horváth & Partners Management Consultants and several other organizations.
- Professor Peter Lorange recently founded the Lorange Network, a learning and sharing platform for family office principals and family business owners. Previously he was the owner and the president of the Lorange Institute of Business. Lorange is one of the world's foremost business school academics. For 15 years, he was the President of IMD, Lausanne, one of Europe's leading business schools. Peter Lorange is Professor of Strategy at IMD and holds the Kristian Gerhard Jebsen Chair of International Shipping. In addition to his academic background, he has gained extensive shipping know-how as director on several shipping company boards. His areas of special interest are global strategic management, strategic planning, and entrepreneurship for growth.
- Dr. Kathleen Park is an assistant professor of administrative sciences, with specializations in strategic and international management and the management of

innovation and technology in the Department of Administrative Sciences, Boston University. Her research interests are at the intersection of innovation, internationalization through mergers and acquisitions, global strategy, emerging markets, leadership, management and entrepreneurial teams, and corporate governance. She has published in leading journals and her work has been recognised with awards by the Academy of Management.

In what follows, we outline what we consider the key issues that need attention in research programs on COVID-19 and its consequences and summarize how the papers included in this set have advanced ways to address many of the issues. In successive sections, we raise issues of 1) conceptualization of the crisis, 2) the role of organizations, 3) challenges of the global pandemic, and 4) business-society relationships. We then return to the invited and submitted papers and place them against the backdrop of these issues. We conclude with some thoughts on how to move forward on research in this domain.

### **Conceptualization of COVID-19**

How should we conceptualize COVID-19? Although this may seem a rather quaint question, theory and research about COVID-19 will depend crucially on the researchers' conceptualization of the phenomenon. We offer three illustrations.

First, COVID-19 could be viewed as a unique *exogenous* shock. It could be a disruption that could not be foreseen, requiring various responses such as the redesign of supply chains or building resilience. Alternately it could be viewed as a disruption that mutates and morphs over time, somewhat consistent with the emerging scientific evidence, and we do not yet have models specified to deal with this conceptualization in our field. Finally, this could be viewed as a

member of family of crises, in which case COVID's features that are common to similar crises and those that are unique become the topic of conceptualization.

Second, although the case for viewing COVID-19 as a biological crisis is compelling, there are other relevant options. For example, it could be formulated as a socio-technical phenomenon, which allows inclusion of social and cultural facts into its conceptualization. To quote Gillian Tett,

...To fix the pandemic, you definitely need brilliant medical science. The geniuses who came out and collaborated on the vaccines did an incredible service to humanity. What we learned in the pandemic is that medicine alone doesn't work unless you also understand the social and cultural context and the incentives shaping people. (2021)

Needless to say, the characteristics of COVID-19 and responses to it that flow from each conceptualization may be different. When viewed as a shock, COVID's detailed descriptions may not be of great import, whereas viewing it as a crisis which shares general features with other crises (e.g., Coombs & Laufer, 2018) may generate organizational adjustments or capability building (e.g., resilience). Viewing it as a scientific problem directs our attention to topics such as innovation and the speed of diagnosis, but a socio-technical conception also alerts us to issues of implementation, as Tett has above argued.

A third question is about characterizing the COVID-19 case at an appropriate level of analysis, an issue that is well understood among the research community. We could discern at least four levels of analysis: organizational, industry, national, and global. The organizational level, a level (along with industry level) that is arguably the most germane to management scholars and practitioners, may suggest COVID-19 characteristics that are consequential for

organizational strategies (e.g., opportunity vs threat) and structures (e.g., resilience) either from diverse perspectives, e.g., an economic point of view or from a cognitive perspective.

It is not clear at this stage of development of our understanding whether the characteristics of interest remain the same across levels. However, it is plausible that multiple levels of analysis will reveal facets of the virus phenomenon that may enable firms to orchestrate effective responses.

### **The role of organizations**

Although the COVID-19 story is novel, it may be premature to disregard the lessons from history when discussing the role of organizations. This is especially true in the case of Western firms operating with government guidance and incentives developing vaccines, making ventilators, personal protection equipment, and other tools to fight the pandemic. This institutional arrangement is quite reminiscent of that which operated so successfully in the US as “the arsenal of democracy” during World War II.

Although the US was already providing a large share of the Allies’ armaments prior to its own entry into the war, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor took that effort to another level. Following this attack President Roosevelt established the War Production Board by executive order. From this point forward until the end of the war, the US produced approximately 40% of the world’s armaments. In contrast, Germany, Japan, and Italy produced only about 30% combined. (United States Bureau of Demobilization, Civilian Production Administration, 1947). The major pathway through which this was accomplished was by switching industrial production from consumer goods to armaments and other items for use by the military. The auto industry was a particularly important actor in this regard. For example, according to the US Defense Department (Vergun, 2020) the auto industry was able to transition its production so completely

that it went from the production of over 3 million civilian vehicles in 1940 to only 139 additional civilian vehicles for the remainder of the war, with the rest of its production going to support the war effort. It is probably too soon to tell if this collaborative business-government approach to addressing the pandemic is as successful as this collaboration in World War II, but history will render a judgement on this.

Whether we adopt historical analogies or qualitative methods to identify ground realities, we expect the pandemic may reveal diverse roles of organizations, not all of which can be subsumed within an overarching framework. To illustrate this diversity, we offer several interconnected vantage points, again without claiming exhaustiveness.

*Boundary question:* The organizational boundary question that has been a major topic of scholarly discussion in strategic management may need to be re-invoked in the case of the COVID-19 crisis. In these discussions, management scholars have benefited from prior developments in transaction cost economics, with its primary focus on buyer seller relationships. However, many organizational actions in this crisis may not conform to the underlying assumptions of the transaction cost economics. The historical analogies from World War II would suggest that, and observable actions undertaken in different countries point to that as well. Indeed, this crisis is filled with ‘externalities’: what other external entities do may influence the actions of a focal firm and vice versa. On the face of it, although there is a fair amount of theoretical consensus regarding the boundary appropriate for strategy analysis, the issue may need to be re-opened and justified in the COVID-19 context. This is discussed in the article by Camillus et al. in this issue.

*Managerial Issues.* Turning to managerial issues examining how national governments dealt with COVID-19 offers many thought-provoking lessons for managers. We put forth as examples six issues:

1. Some governments managed the pandemic better than others did. Leadership played an important part in this respect. Broadly, it is alleged that populist leaders such as Trump (United States), Bolsonaro (Brazil) and Johnson (United Kingdom) did not do as well as less strident leaders such as Ardern (New Zealand), Frederiksen (Denmark), and Merkel (Germany). It is surmised that the authoritative and transactional style of populist leaders coupled with reliance on a small group of advisors proved ineffective, while the inclusive, delegative, and transformational style of the second group of leaders proved more effective. We contend that these conjectures equally apply to management teams and in crisis, delegative, plural, and transformational styles of *leadership* are more likely to prove effective.
2. Newspaper reports suggest that leaders that took *decisions more quickly* fared better than those who delayed making decisions. For example, many commentators suggest that delay in lockdowns in March 2020 and September 2020 led to significant additional deaths in England. The decision time window in a crisis is likely to be narrow and missing the window has significant negative implications. The national level experience suggests that management teams that recognize this appreciate the need for decisive action and are likely to fare better. Anecdotal examples suggest that firms pivoting early to a business model that is conducive to short-term survival and long-term resilience and growth have successfully navigated the COVID-19 crisis ([Guillén, 2020](#)).

3. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of being *prepared for the unexpected*.

National governments throughout the world found it difficult to contain COVID-19 despite the pandemic occupying the number one spot in their risk register. Why? Because their plans were based on identifying risks in advance (i.e., “known-knowns,” such as a flu pandemic). However, according to the *Guardian* (2020), these plans lacked flexibility to deal with the unexpected (i.e., known-unknowns such as COVID-19). Plans based on characteristics of known risks meant that many governments struggled to contain COVID-19, resulting in significant loss of life and decline in GDP. When Mike Tyson was asked by a reporter whether he was worried about Evander Holyfield and his fight plan he answered, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Tyson was echoing an old saying, “no plan survives first contact with the enemy.” This suggests that although it is advisable to have a plan, plans should be flexible, and not solely be based on the characteristics of risk.<sup>i</sup>

Translating this to the operations of an organization points to the need for agility. An agile operation has minimal dependence on the characteristics of risk, and disruption is minimal. Technology such as 3D printing offers both agility and flexibility.

4. *Transparency*. Would COVID-19 have caused as much havoc if the world had been alerted to its existence earlier? Lack of transparency by the Chinese government is cited as one reason for delayed responses. But how many countries had surveillance teams dedicated to scanning the horizon for viruses? We suspect the answer is none. The UK government set up a surveillance team following the SARS outbreak, but they abandoned it after several years when no threats were discovered. Had the surveillance team been in place, the UK government likely would have been in a better position to deal with the pandemic. This lesson suggests that it is wise for management teams to consider investing in horizon or



environmental scanning capacity offering them better opportunity to deal with “known-unknowns”.

5. *Development speed.* A key reason for the development of COVID-19 vaccines in record time was collaboration between knowledge centers, pharmaceutical firms, and governments. The UK government made significant investment in vaccine development and brokered a partnership between Oxford University and Astra Zeneca. The lesson here for any management team is the importance of developing and maintaining strategic alliances.
6. *External, non-economic factors.* Vaccine nationalism, threats to supplies, and a transactional approach to vaccine procurement by the European Commission caused supply difficulties in the European Union. On the other hand, appointing a vaccine task force and adopting a partnership approach to vaccine development enabled the UK to roll out its vaccine programme quicker and more effectively. The experience suggests that supply chains based on partnerships are more effective and resilient than supply chains based on price and transactional relationships.

In addition to the general managerial challenges, we have also witnessed unique challenges in organizing for the global challenges created by the pandemic.

### **Issues related to organizing for global challenges**

Amidst the multitude of issues related to organizing for global challenges, we isolated four that have been touched upon in the papers. These are: challenges of ‘global organization,’ persistence of alliances, diversity of values, and unpredictability of externalities.

*Challenges of ‘global organization.’* During the past year, organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) have occupied the center stage of attention, as central actors during the progression of the pandemic. We term them ‘global organizations,’ to distinguish

them from MNCs and international firms. These organizations are funded by a number of countries and are not profit driven. They thus deal with overlapping and conflicting stakeholders. Perhaps they serve as a primary scanning mechanism for the world at large (e.g., WHO for health-related issues in the case of COVID-19), and their own legitimacy – e.g., trustworthiness of the data they provide-- may well be a singular coin for influencing decisions and public opinion. It is quite likely that global organizations may play crucial roles in other pandemics as well. Yet from an organizational and strategic point of view, they have received limited theoretical and empirical attention in our fields.

*Persistence of alliances.* The speed of response we have witnessed-- both in terms of isolating the causes of the pandemic and finding a vaccine for it – is partly the result of some major alliances. For example, the upstream venture between Astra Zeneca and Oxford was financed by the British government and the downstream Johnson & Johnson – Merck manufacturing venture for the J&J vaccine was assisted by the Trump and Biden administrations. Thus, these alliances involved actors with motives other than profit. Although we have had a sizeable literature on strategic alliances, the behavior of these complex multi-party alliances may not be fully explained by them. This may also require organizations to learn new skill sets because complex alliances may well turn out to be a characteristic of effective responses to pandemics.

*Diversity of values.* In global pandemics, organizations will have to address the expectations of stakeholders with very diverse values, some of which may conflict with each other. For example, in the case of COVID-19, the effectiveness of vaccine delivery may stop at the borders of calls for equity. This diversity of values is likely to make intense conflict the ‘new normal,’ and executives are likely to be called upon, individually or in teams, to navigate

through some very delicate situations. Whether traditional approaches such as “sequential attention to goals” will work under these circumstances is itself a moot question.

*Unpredictability of externalities.* The concept of externalities that has had high utility in many strategic analyses hinged upon a clear separation of organization from its environment, an idea that may not be particularly relevant for analyzing global challenges. As Camillus et al. implied in this issue, the answer to the boundary question proposed by transaction cost theorists has dubious value in these settings. An extension of their argument is in the realm of externalities. One strategy that has been particularly observable in financial markets is to ignore externalities; this may not be an option in global challenges. Indeed, externalities may not be easily predictable, thereby enhancing the ambiguity of choice in many of the global challenges.

Taken together, the four challenges may require a paradigm shift in our thinking about organizing for global issues. New organizational forms, absence of available theoretical frameworks, a milieu of intense conflict and ambiguity are likely to stretch our theoretical capabilities. But herein may lie a vast theoretical adventure filled with both dead ends and grand successes.

### **Business and Society Relationship**

There can be no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had dramatic impacts upon business-society relationships and has posed great challenges for the successful operation of private firms worldwide. The papers in this special issue provide a generally favorable assessment of the responses of private companies to these challenges and we, as the editors, agree with this view. Archie Carroll, in his paper in this special issue, does an excellent job in describing the breadth and depth of changes in business-society relationships that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about, focusing on employees, customers, and communities. The reader

should refer to that article for a discussion of these changes; here we will consider some of the underlying causes and implications of these changes.

For a variety of reasons private firms were thrust onto the front line in the fight against COVID-19. In most countries, it was private firms that had the means to develop, produce, and distribute vaccines, personal protection equipment (PPE), and other medical supplies necessary to fight the disease directly. In addition, organizations involved with the supply of food, personal hygiene products, and myriad other basic necessities and services were suddenly viewed as important contributors to the fight against COVID-19, and their employees were often viewed as “essential workers”. Moreover, the politicization of COVID-19 in many countries and the corresponding efforts to fight the pandemic have further highlighted the role of private organizations in the COVID-19 battle. The United States provides an excellent example both of this politicization as well as how this has forced organizations to take a larger role in fighting the pandemic than many would have expected.

Efforts by the Trump administration in the United States to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic and the necessity for individuals to undertake medically advised countermeasures such as wearing of masks and social distancing led to a new front in the culture wars that have been raging in the US for decades. The fault lines in this divide were roughly along the same lines as the debate over climate change discussed in the Grant and Wunder article in this issue, with liberal Democrats more likely to believe and follow the medical and scientific advice and conservative Republicans less likely to do so. Adding to the controversy was the skepticism in some quarters about the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines that were developed in record time.

The patchwork of regulations in the US at the federal, state, and local levels left many individuals frequently puzzled over what the pertinent regulations were with respect to a range of issues such as mask usage, social distancing, and vaccinations requirements. Thus, in many cases private businesses have been better positioned than other institutions to both clarify and enforce the relevant regulations pertaining to these matters. In addition to following and enforcing government-mandated regulations many of these organizations imposed their own safety and health rules for employees, customers, suppliers, and others. Referring to Carroll's four-part model of corporate social responsibility, one can easily provide economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic rationales for corporations undertaking such measures. And it seems very likely that in so doing these organizations are promoting their own interests at the same time they are promoting the interests of their various stakeholders and society as a whole.

It is interesting to note that on the surface the pandemic response implications of the Carroll model of CSR do not greatly differ from the implications of Milton Friedman's more traditional view (1970) that the only social responsibility of business is to "increase its profits within the rules of the game." However, in practical terms the differences would be more substantial. Friedman would agree with Carroll's view of taking the interests of consumers, employees, the community, and other stakeholders into account as long as there was an economic incentive or legal requirement to do so. But he would be less likely to acknowledge the economic benefits to the firm of many CSR activities, and he would also likely protest the interference in the free market of many legally-motivated CSR efforts. In addition, Carroll explicitly acknowledges the validity of ethical motivations for CSR responses to the pandemic that go beyond economic or legal motivations. In contrast Friedman in much of his writings about CSR (Friedman, 1970; Friedman and Friedman, 1962; McClaughry, 1972) seems to equate

legality with ethics even though at one point in his 1970 article admonishes firms to follow “ethical custom”.

It is important to note that in many cases private firms were thrust into the middle of the culture wars noted above and forced to provide leadership in combatting the pandemic that politicians and government leaders were not providing due to political considerations. In addition, front-line employees in such establishments as airlines, restaurants, grocery stores, and other retail establishments have found themselves in occasionally violent confrontations with customers who have refused to follow the prescribed guidelines. Violent confrontations over the use of personal protective equipment have also been seen in other countries, but these are less common in Asian countries where the wearing of masks to safeguard against illnesses less serious than COVID-19 is common.

It is still too early to tell how many of the measures undertaken by businesses in response to COVID-19 will just be temporary adjustments to the pandemic and how many will mark permanent adjustments in how we work and do business. However, it seems very unlikely that work practices will revert completely back to pre-pandemic conditions, and a new normal will emerge.

### **An Overview of the Papers**

In their paper titled, “Strategy in the Time of Pandemics, Climate Change, and the Kurzweil Singularity,” Camillus, Ramanadhan, and Ganapathy argue that disruptions caused by pandemics, climate change, and the Kurzweil Singularity (an anticipated point at which artificial intelligence of machines surpasses the intelligence of humans) are different in both kind and degree from industry disruptions, and offer a possible typology of disruptions. They caution that in the case of pandemics such as the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, climate change, and the

Kurzweil Singularity, future societal disruptions are inevitable, and multiple societal disruptions will happen in the near future, within the next two decades, well within the career span of current middle- and senior-level managers. According to the authors, these societal disruptions have little if any precedent; their causes are interrelated and difficult to disentangle; there are multiple stakeholders, with different and possibly conflicting priorities; there is no evident or obviously “right” response; and the perception and understanding of the disruption is influenced by the experience and distinctive/strategic competencies of the observer. They further reason that employing the economists’ transaction cost approach (Williamson, 1981) to defining boundaries cannot readily be applied in the context of nascent markets that are in flux, and to define the organization in terms of its pre-disruption strategy is probably an exercise in futility. For these authors, firms will need to have the will and ability to enter and succeed in what has been colloquially referred as the “suicide corner,” (i.e., where a given firm is entering a new business that requires new competencies) and when seeking to craft the harmony that strategy endeavors to create between the organization and its environment, the organization’s identity is perhaps the most meaningful and practical way to define it. Building on the metaphor of “wicked problems,” these authors advance smart power, supported by analytical, feedforward techniques and modular organizational designs as a foundation for designing and implementing strategies and strategic management systems. The authors support their claims by field research conducted by the Business of Humanity® (BoH) Project ([www.boh.pitt.edu](http://www.boh.pitt.edu)) at the Tever Health and Wellness Center (THWC), located in a “tribal” community in a rural part of the state of Gujarat in India.

Grant and Wunder consider the similarities and differences in the threats presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and those associated with climate change as well as the similarities and differences in the organizational and political responses to these crises. Given the greater

downside risk from climate change, they note that the current crisis provides a significant opportunity for organizations and societies to learn how to deal more effectively with the challenges of climate change. In particular, they point out that one important lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic is the need for transnational cooperation across borders and cross-sectoral collaboration within countries.

Utilizing his four-part model of corporate social responsibility, Carroll analyzes the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic impacts of COVID-19, and he details those impacts on various stakeholders of the firm. Along with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Carroll sees an opportunity for firms to reorient and reenergize their commitment to corporate social responsibility at this time. In doing so, he specifically recommends that corporations provide greater opportunities for stakeholder input on the operationalization of CSR through stakeholder engagement procedures. In addition, Carroll is optimistic that authentic CSR Exemplar firms will make responses to COVID-19 central to their CSR strategies in the coming years and that other more mainstream companies will likely follow suit.

Lorange combines practical experience of establishing a number of successful businesses with an academic career that includes turning around and making IMD Business School a leading international business school and publishing in top journals to consider the impact of COVID-19. He argues that two competing forces will shape the degree of change – libertarian tendency and the institution shaped by COVID-19. He argues that ascendancy of libertarian tendency will return us to more or less the status quo, but ascendancy of institutions will result in more fundamental and long-lasting permanent change. Lorange's view mirrors the newspapers' reports hinting at divisions between some of UK's members of the parliament and the conservative government in terms of degree and extent of intervention and in the USA between



the Republican and Democratic parties. He also argues that COVID-19 has quickened the pace of strategic change. Some of these changes are likely to be temporary whilst others will be permanent. Lorange argues that some of the strategic shifts would have occurred irrespective of COVID-19. Overall, the article offers insights to both academics and practitioners. In academic term, it offers interesting lines of research, for example, the relationship between the type of strategic shift (temporary or permanent) change and managerial cognition and structure. In terms of practitioners, it codifies the type of change and the potential flow through.

Leadership plays a critical role in enabling firms to navigate the turbulence caused by COVID-19. Moreover, understandably there are few empirical studies examining organizations' responses to COVID-19. Parker's paper adopts a revelatory case perspective examining the relationship between leadership and effectiveness of a critical international supply chain. The case study firm is located in the Middle East, a situational context that, despite its importance, receives little attention. The case study clearly demonstrates the impact of leadership and strategic partnership that mirrors the impact of leadership at the national level and the importance of partnerships discussed previously. The paper not only contributes to our nascent understanding of the type of leadership and strategies that lead to the successful navigation of a sudden and unexpected crisis but also offer practical insights particularly demonstrating the value of digital supply chains, humanitarian leadership, and innovation in successfully mitigating unexpected crises.

A comparison of the five essays is presented in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, the authors have approached the topic from *diverse* vantage points, from that of global organizations to business and society relationships, and finally to individual firms. They have been careful not to offer simplistic solutions—either theoretical or empirical—to the evolving

phenomenon of the pandemic. But all of them take a holistic view of the phenomenon and offer viewpoints or approaches worthy of consideration as we debate and discuss the causes and consequences of the pandemic.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## **Future Directions**

As mentioned above, the authors in this special issue have adopted somewhat diverse approaches to examine the pandemic phenomenon. Amidst this diversity, there are some common suggestions for research in this arena. Upon reflecting on the issues raised by the various authors, we would suggest several approaches for research on COVID-19 and its aftermath.

First, and arguably most importantly, we suggest that researchers (or teams of researchers) adopt a *strategic* perspective to research in this area that is somewhat different from an opportunistic approach that relies on capitalizing on available data, be they archival or easily obtained through surveys. We characterize ‘strategic’ as research that keeps major questions in the forefront as the reason for inquiry, and that culminates in valid evidence-based prescriptions for organizations. In the spirit of “let a thousand flowers bloom,” we are *not* suggesting a single approach but a diversity of approaches each of which has its own perspective on the COVID-19 phenomenon.

Second, we would like to put forth the need for a *systemic* view of the phenomenon, rather than a disciplinary orientation. A systemic view is fundamental to the problem-focused approach advocated above and will likely prevent the premature closure of the boundaries of the phenomenon under investigation. This will also help this research withstand the pressure for

closure created by disciplinary biases, difficulty of conceptualizing and operationalizing variables, and, oftentimes, the ignorance of the researchers. Thus, we underscore the necessity for researchers to acknowledge their own ignorance and limitations and to spend time to comprehend the full scale of the phenomenon.

Third, lessons from the COVID-19 experience have the potential to extend our understanding and application of several ‘holistic’ approaches currently prevalent in organizations. To illustrate, the open innovation, ecosystem, and corporate social responsibility movements that have become popular during the last two decades may be able to borrow from the lessons and enrich their own pursuits. For one, the COVID-19 experience is a stark reminder that the locus of innovation is now in the ecosystem, and not in the firm. The emerging practices may offer practical ways for firms to take advantage of the insight in their open innovation efforts. For another, ecosystems, consisting of networks of actors (e.g., firms, entrepreneurs, and scientists), groups (knowledge centers, regulators, financiers and government), and institutions (formal and informal laws, regulations, and customs), have to be established and as prior scholarship tells us, characteristics of interaction among the actors determines the success of innovation (Ghobadian and Talavera, 2020). In the UK, to deal with COVID-19, the government acted as a catalytic actor establishing the ecosystem – Oxford University, Astra Zeneca, health service, and the governing interaction characteristics. The ecosystem interacted with an external regulator (Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the characteristics of interaction was modified to speed up the process (Gilbert and Green, 2021). Finally, the stakeholder management view of corporate social responsibility provides an excellent approach to gaining diverse perspectives about COVID-19 and potential solutions to the problems it creates by active engagement with stakeholders.

We note several implications flowing from our suggested directions for research. First, construction of databases will be an important activity, and in many cases, this may *precede* other activities. Second, research on COVID-19 may require global teams of scholars working together because observations may be scattered over the globe. Third, this form of research is likely to be co-created by scholars and other important agents such as executives, government officials, and in some cases, the population at large (Ghobadian and Narayanan, 2014). Fourth, the forums for data collection and dissemination of findings are not restricted to journal articles but will also assume the form of workshops, or action research projects.

Taken together, COVID-19 experience may enable us to break out of the dominant paradigm of research in business, a paradigm that has in recent years attracted much criticism. We suspect that the current debates about business research oscillate between the need for rigor and relevance, uncritically uphold the sanctity of peer review, and advocate citations as a primary way to assess the impact of research. Although these debates and activities have the potential to fine tune our existing research enterprise, they focus on single loop learning with all its baggage. COVID-19 offers an opportunity to disrupt the paradigm with attendant benefits to society.

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The UK pandemic plans were based on characteristics of a flu pandemic. There is no asymptomatic transmission in the case of flu, but COVID-19’s behavior has been different. Hence, it is reported that these plans failed. Thus, there is a need for plans that are not heavily based on a specific risk; we need flexible plans.

Table 1: A Comparison of the contributions

Authors	Camillus, et al.	Carroll	Grant and Wunder	Lorange	Park
<i>Characterization of the paper</i> Primary Focus	Theorizing about pandemics and organizational response to them	Impacts of COVID-19 and corporate social responsibility (CSR) responses	Lessons from pandemic that can be applied to promoting sustainability	Potential strategic responses available	Examination of relationship between leadership and pandemic
Concepts advanced	‘Suicide corner,’ identity, values, smart power	4-part model of CSR (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic)	‘Sustilence’—sustainability combined with resilience	Practical avenues open to firms	Type of leadership helpful in a pandemic
Empirical focus if any	Case study	News reports	News reports and literature review	Conceptual	Single Case Study
<i>Issues raised in the introduction</i>					

Characterization of pandemic	A societal disruption	Exogenous shock/Global crisis	Exogenous shock/Global crisis, but not as serious as climate change	Exogenous shock	Exogenous shock
Level of analysis	Global, organizational	Firm	Multi-level: Firm to global	Firm	Firm
Boundary question	Current models inadequate	Firms' CSR responses	Firm response to global response	Potential strategic responses available	Firm response
The role of organization	Prepare for future societal disruptions	Reacting responsibly to crisis wrt 4 CSR dimensions	Developing sustilience	Reacting to crisis	Managing the crisis
Challenges of global pandemic	From the vantage point of a firm	Economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic challenges	Learning and applying lessons to combating climate change	Permanent or temporary change in direction	Keep global supply chain functioning
Business society relationship	Not specified	Multifaceted-along 4 CSR dimensions	Impacts on UN sustainable development goals	Not specified	Role of humanitarian leadership