HOW ARE EMPLOYEES ADAPTING DURING COVID-19? FACTORS INFLUENCING FEELINGS OF FEAR AND HOPE

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Abstract

How are employees adapting at work during COVID-19? In a 3-wave study of 1970 full-time employees from a large University, we examine how perceived uncertainty at work during COVID-19 impacts employee emotional reactions and subsequent behavior. In particular, we examine when employees feel afraid versus hopeful when facing uncertainty. We also explore the mediating role of fear and hope as emotional mechanisms linking perceived uncertainty to behavioral outcomes (e.g., helping and withdrawal).

Study Aims and Background
The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly disrupted all aspects of life, including work. Being able to adapt in the face of uncertainty is an important aspect of work performance (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Employees have adapted by working virtually, setting up home offices, learning new technologies, and, for many, dealing with little separation between work and home life. Many employees are likely to feel hopeless or anxious as a result of these changes. For example, more than 25% of employees in the United States report fears of job loss due to the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Condon, 2020). However, other employees may feel more optimistic in the face of uncertainty, seeing the changes as an opportunity to proactively develop new skills or be innovative at work.

In this study, we will examine the conditions under which employees feel afraid versus hopeful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conceptually, we draw on theories of discrete emotions (e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) to develop our hypotheses. In particular, the primary emotional responses when facing uncertainty are fear and hope (Roseman, 2011). These emotional reactions are two sides of the same coin, with some employees likely to respond to uncertainty by feeling afraid, and others feeling more optimistic about the situation. Furthermore, building on the notion that employee reactions to uncertainty are contingent on the situation (e.g., Frijda et al., 1989), we examine how a set of theoretically relevant moderators influence the type of emotion experienced in times of uncertainty. For example, research on fear suggests that this emotion can be attenuated when employees have high levels of self-efficacy or an appropriate role model to show them how to effectively handle the situation (Rachman, 1990). We use this theoretical rationale to examine those factors that can weaken uncertainty's strong positive relationship on fea. Finally, building on the notion that each discrete emotion is accompanied by a specific action tendency (e.g., Elfenbein, 2007) we examine the potential for a mediated relationship linking uncertainty at work to employee behavior via emotional reactions. For example, we expect that uncertainty will be linked to withdrawal via feelings of fear given this emotion's tendency to motivate avoidant behavior, and expect that uncertainty will be linked to helping behavior via feelings of hope given this emotion's tendency to motivate approach behavior.

Example Hypotheses
Perceived uncertainty at work (T1) is positively associated with feelings of fear (T2) and negatively associated with feelings of hope (T2).

Self-efficacy (T1) moderates the relationship between perceived uncertainty (T1) and fear (T2) such that there is a weaker positive relationship when self-efficacy is high.

Self-efficacy (T1) moderates the relationship between perceived uncertainty (T1) and hope (T2) such that there is a weaker negative relationship when self-efficacy is high.

Perceived supervisor adaptability (T1) moderates the relationship between perceived uncertainty (T1) and fear such that there is a weaker positive relationship when one's supervisor is perceived to have a high level of adaptivity.

Perceived supervisor adaptability (T1) moderates the relationship between perceived uncertainty (T1) and hope such that there is a weaker negative relationship when one's supervisor is perceived to have a high level of adaptivity.

Method
To examine our research questions, we are conducting a three-wave survey study of full-time staff (i.e., non-faculty) at a large university in the Eastern United States. Waves 1 (May 2020) and 2 (June 2020) have already been collected, and Wave 3 will be launched in mid-July. The data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when the vast majority of staff in this sample (89%) were working from home and adapting to changing working conditions.

At Time 1, employees self-reported the predictor and moderating variables; at Time 2 employees self-reported the mediating variables; and at Time 3 employees will self-report the dependent variables. Each wave of the survey was separated by 4 weeks because research demonstrates that this amount of time can reduce common method variance (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Clark, 2002).

We partnered with the University's Human Resources department, who provided us with a list of email addresses for all non-faculty full-time employees at the main campus and regional campuses. This sample includes staff and supervisors from a range of departments and schools (e.g., Athletics, Facilities Management, IT, Student Affairs, and University Counsel). Initially, we emailed a survey to 7000 employees. At Time 1, we received completed surveys from 2731 participants (a 39% response rate). At Time 2, we received completed surveys from 1970 participants (a 72% response rate), for an effective response rate of 28%. This response is superior to the rate for similar surveys launched by the Human Resources department at this University (approximately 10%).

Measures
Please see Table 1 for a sample list of example measures. We are also controlling for a number of variables related to perceived uncertainty, emotional reactions, and COVID-19. This includes trait negative affect, work location (home vs. office), worries about contracting COVID-19, and perceived financial precarity.

Fit with COVID-19 Plenary
We believe that this proposal is an excellent fit with the objectives of the Rapid Research Plenary because of our focus on how employees are adapting at work during COVID 19. Furthermore, we are examining several relevant mediating and dependent variables on the topics of emotions, employee wellbeing, and proactivity that will be of interest to OB Division members.

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Table 1: Example Measures in Study

	Variable	Items	Survey Wave	Source
IV	Uncertainty at Work	8	Time 1	Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991
Moderator	Self-efficacy	4	Time 1	Chen et al., 2001
Moderator	Perceptions of supervisor's adaptive behavior	3	Time 1	Griffin et al., 2007
Mechanism	Fear	3	Time 2	PANAS-X, Watson & Clark, 1999
Mechanism	Hope	4	Time 2	Luthans et al., 2007
DV	Helping	3	Time 3	Van Dyne & LePine, 1998
DV	Withdrawal	3	Time 3	Scott & Barnes, 2011