

# Theorizing and researching contemporary organizations in contexts of crisis and extreme events



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Our effort to organize an issue that brings together papers on crisis contexts and extreme events was motivated by the potential to contribute to Management studies. The topic is multidisciplinary, but even so, it has not been sufficiently recognized by researchers as an organizational phenomenon that deserves attention to understand the magnitude of its impacts.

Societies are faced with certain events, such as wars, terrorism, violence and public safety, natural disasters, air disasters, political and economic crises, extortion, and violations of privacy, which are increasingly common in newspaper headlines worldwide. In recent years, the Vale's dam collapse (Brumadinho, MG, Brazil), the fire at the Flamengo Club (Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil), the terrorist attack in New Zealand, the fire at Notre-Dame Cathedral, the death of people trampled at a *funk* dance in Paraisópolis (São Paulo, SP, Brazil), the earthquake in Haiti, the fire in the Amazon, the accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, are examples of events that make the fragility and vulnerability of the world apparent, raising important questions about how organizations, societies and individuals receive and deal with the impacts of these events. As far as contemporary organizations are concerned, the central issues relating to these events are related to their operations, structures, resources, community, and workers, which are central to understanding extreme contexts.

In the field of Management studies, the need to consider context is recognized for its importance in various perspectives of organizational analysis, starting with contingency theories through to resource dependency theory, new institutionalism, practice-based studies, and critical management studies, among others. Context means “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior, as well as the functional relationships between variables” (Johns, 2006, p. 386).

In the literature on context and extreme events, there is a diversity of nomenclatures attributed to the term, generating unhelpful controversies (Hällgren et al., 2018). Traditionally, the term “extreme” is used to refer to

[...] situations that occur out of the ordinary and subcultures of *quasi-deviant* leisure that aim at an escape from commercialized and over-rationalized modernity or to professions that involve high laughter, exposure to dirty work and threat to life (Granter et al., 2015, p. 443).

However, the term has gained new contours, coming to define conventional work and organizational domains characterized by the intensity of work, normalization of behaviors, and extreme work cultures, which bring threats of material and non-material damage.



## An extreme context is

[...] an environment in which one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological or material consequences for organizational members (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 897).

The damage is potential for organizational members and those who are somehow involved with it. Extreme contexts are not homogeneous, being crossed by variations in terms of the temporality of the organization, the magnitude of the consequences, the likelihood of occurrence, the proximity of organizational members, and the forms of threats (Hannah et al., 2009). Despite the similarities, extreme context and crisis<sup>1</sup> are distinct phenomena: In a crisis, causes and effects are ambiguous; in extreme contexts, threats are specific and severe, organizations can anticipate, and causes and results are often identifiable (Hannah et al., 2009).

Extreme events have gained more vital interest from researchers in various fields of knowledge due to political, economic, and ecological uncertainties. These disasters result in tragedies and corporate scandals related to social irresponsibility. Being defined as occurrences that can result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological or material consequences for the members of the organization (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 898), consumers, affecting their ability to produce and obtain resources (Hällgren et al., 2018), extreme events have some elements in common: Pre-crisis, emergency plan, crisis, crisis management, research, implementation of changes (Buchanan, 2011).

However, academic research on extreme contexts has produced responses to specific events (Maglajlic, 2019), composing a fragmented body of research (Hällgren et al., 2018) and limiting efforts to systematize what we can learn about the nature of these events and the contexts in which they occur so that we can improve our understanding of these phenomena, their characteristics, and foundations. Recognizing that extreme contexts provide a platform for studying complex organizational phenomena enhances our understanding of human and organizational behavior, power games, organizational

<sup>1</sup> See Maia's discussion (2021, p. 212) on "the meaning that the concept [of crisis] assumes in social theory, and its relationship with functional and normative problems remains uncertain, as does its own usefulness for qualifying historical time."

processes of adaptation and resilience, and the challenges and barriers that organizations find difficult to respond to.

In this special issue, six papers offer answers or ways of understanding crisis contexts and extreme events. Three papers highlight the importance of resilience: “Resilient performance faced with a period of economic crisis: Integrated model of conceptions and research strategy” by Leandro K. Rosa, Roberto F. Decourt and Daniel F. Vancin; “How to measure organizational resilience? Validating a simplified model” by Alã Y. P. Santos and Renata G. Spers; and “Social customer relationship management and organizational resilience of Brazilian microenterprises during the Covid-19 pandemics” by Guilherme A. S. Andrade, Márcia M. S. B. Espejo, Rigoberto García-Contreras, and Cleston Alexandre dos Santos. In contrast to the emphasis on resilience, the article “*Vale tudo*: Action strategies for Vale after the Córrego do Feijão dam criminal disaster” by Tatiane Lúcia de Melo and Liliane de Oliveira Guimarães tells us how the company Vale dealt with the consequences of the dam collapse for the community. The article “Perception of entrepreneurs regarding public policies in fighting Covid-19” by Claudia M. S. Bezerra, Heidy R. Ramos, Eudes V. Bezerra, Marco A. C. Teixeira, and Marcos F. Magalhães looks at the role of the government in terms of public policies for dealing with a specific extreme event. The article “Leaders in the pandemic: Contributions to the literature on leadership in organizations in extreme contexts” by Beatriz M. B. Braga and Vanessa M. Santos provides us with a leadership model that we believe can contribute to both research on the subject and guidance for leaders who may experience this context.

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