American Psychological Association

Journal of Applied Psychology

ISSN: 0021-9010

2021, Vol. 106, No. 4, 530–541
https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000918

Talking About COVID-19 is Positively Associated With Team Cultural Tightness: Implications for Team Deviance and Creativity

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The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected everyone's work and daily life, and many employees are talking with their coworkers about this widespread pandemic on a regular basis. In this research, we examine how talking about crises such as COVID-19 at the team level affects team dynamics and behaviors. Drawing upon cultural tightness–looseness theory, we propose that talking about the COVID-19 crisis among team members is positively associated with team cultural tightness, which in turn benefits teams by decreasing team deviance but hurts teams by decreasing team creativity. Furthermore, we suggest that team virtuality moderates and weakens these indirect effects because face-to-face communication about COVID-19 is more powerful in influencing team cultural tightness than virtual communication. Results from a multisource, three-wave field study during the pandemic lend substantial support to these hypotheses. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings and directions for future research.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, crisis talk, cultural tightness, deviance, creativity

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000918.supp

As of this writing (March 3, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has killed over 2.5 million people (Word Health Organization, 2020) and caused global disruption to businesses (Carlsson-Szlezak et al., 2020). According to the communication and clinical psychology literature, people naturally talk to each other when they face a crisis, broadly defined as a low probability event or situation perceived by people as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive (Bundy et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017), and COVID-19 certainly qualifies as a major crisis. Importantly, crisis talk is natural because it helps one to cope with a crisis (Pennebaker, 2000) and is prevalent not only within domains of public health (Glowacki et al., 2016), but also in crises related to the economy (Hellwig & Coffey, 2011) and one's organization (Trapp, 2011). Although limited, this area of research has provided insights about why people are motivated to talk about crises (e.g., building trust, Pavri, 2009). In this research, we explore how such crisis talk, defined as team members' discussions about the contents, regardless of valence, related to the crisis, affects team processes and outcomes in the context of COVID-19.

While prior communication research has provided valuable insights into how talking with others about personal negative events affects the focal person's emotional and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Baer et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2021; Rimé et al., 1991; Zech, 1999; Zech & Rimé, 2005), organizational scholars have rarely had an opportunity to explore the effects of employees' talk about macro-crises, such as COVID-19, due to the fact that it is particularly difficult to collect data during or after crises. We heed the call of psychologists (Kazak, 2020) to better understand how COVID-19 affects the workplace by exploring the effects of team COVID-19 talk. We theorize that team COVID-19 talk is positively associated with team cultural tightness, defined as the shared perception among team members regarding "the strength of social norms and the degree of sanctioning within [a team]" (Gelfand et al., 2006, p. 1226), which has important implications for team deviance, defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization" (Bennett & Robinson, 2000, p. 349), and radical creativity, defined as "the generation of ideas that differ substantially from [a team's] existing practices" (Madjar et al., 2011, p. 731; hereafter as *team creativity*).[1] Exploring the effects of such talk is theoretically important because doing so expands our knowledge of talking about crises beyond negative events that are personally relevant (Baer et al., 2018) and its impacts on team outcomes. Practically, given the pervasiveness of crisis talk, organizations

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We are indebted to all members of BUT seminar group and Nuange seminar group in the Sun Yat-sen Business School, Sun Yat-sen University.

This research was supported by the grants funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 71872190, 71502179, and 71702202), Guangdong Province Higher Vocational Colleges & Schools Pearl River Scholar Funded Scheme (2018), Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (Grant No. 19wkpy17), and Singapore Ministry of Education Grant R-317-000-149-115.

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[1] Some scholars have distinguished between radical and incremental creativity (Gilson & Madjar, 2011; Madjar et al., 2011). Incremental creativity refers to the generation of ideas that "imply few changes in frameworks and offer only minor modifications to existing practices and products" (Madjar et al., 2011, p. 731). Given that only radical forms of creativity significantly challenge or deviate from the status quo (Madjar et al., 2011), we only consider the radical forms of creativity in this article and use the term "team creativity" hereafter.

can leverage this knowledge to enhance the benefits and mitigate the costs of such talk.

To address these questions, we draw upon cultural tightness–looseness theory (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011). Cultural tightness is theoretically relevant because it is often a result of external threats (Gelfand et al., 2011; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014) and talking about crises, like COVID-19, is likely to make such external threats salient (Pennebaker et al., 2001; Rimé et al., 1998). Equally important, cultural tightness has been found to have implications for important behavioral outcomes, such as rule-breaking behaviors (Chua et al., 2019; Gelfand et al., 2011). In particular, we suggest that a tight team culture driven by team COVID-19 talk not only would reduce team deviance (Kim & Toh, 2019) but also would diminish team creativity (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014), since both of these outcomes involve breaking rules and challenging the status quo (Gino & Ariely, 2012; Mainemelis, 2010). Furthermore, we provide a more complete understanding of the effects of team COVID-19 talk by examining the moderating role of team virtuality, defined as the level of virtual interaction team members have with each other (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005).

Our research makes important theoretical contributions to the literature. First, by linking the literature on crisis talk and cultural tightness, we investigate how and when talking about crises among team members influences team dynamics and behaviors. Past research has revealed that cultural tightness is a double-edged sword for some macrosocietal indicators at the nation level (Jackson et al., 2019), whereas our work reveals that team COVID-19 talk, as a manifestation of crisis talk, can serve as a tool to increase team cultural tightness, which in turn is a mixed blessing by reducing both team creativity and deviance from a microbehavioral perspective. More generally, our work examines how societal crises and their resultant talks influence organizational behavior. This is important because research in psychology has suggested that people have a natural tendency to discuss societal crises (Pavri, 2009; Pennebaker, 2000), yet scholars and managers have little ideas about such talks' effects on organizational behavior (Abrahamson, 1997; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Second, we contribute to the cultural tightness literature by identifying an important antecedent of team cultural tightness that arises from a societal crisis and its resultant talks. While past research on cultural tightness has primarily focused on the nation or state level and conceptualized objective threats as antecedents to tighter cultural norms (Gelfand et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2020), our work reveals that threat salience, as communicated in crisis talk within teams, can also be associated with the formation of cultural tightness. Furthermore, our research offers a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of crisis talk on team cultural tightness by exploring team virtuality as a key boundary condition, which would provide important practical implications for leaders to manage the tradeoffs of the mixed blessing of cultural tightness.

Theoretical Groundings and Hypothesis Development

Team COVID-19 Talk and Team Cultural Tightness

Gelfand and colleagues (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011) developed cultural tightness–looseness theory to understand why group (e.g., nation, or state) cultures vary in tightness. The two defining features of cultural tightness are the (a) strength of norms and (b) tolerance for norm-violating behaviors. Tight cultures have strong and clearly communicated norms and severe sanctions for deviance, whereas loose cultures express norms ambiguously and have a high tolerance for deviance. Although originally conceptualized at the nation level, variability in cultural tightness has also been observed within nations, organizations, and teams (Chua et al., 2019; Gelfand et al., 2006; Kim & Toh, 2019). In this research, we conceptualize cultural tightness at the team level.

What causes a nation's or team's culture to be tight versus loose? A classic finding is that external threats lead to tighter societies, as they "increase the need for strong norms and the sanctioning of deviant behaviors, which help humans coordinate social action for survival" (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014, p. 7990). Past research has suggested that a team's or an organization's tightness is often formed via a top-down process (Gelfand et al., 2011; Kim & Toh, 2019). For example, South Korean organizations are culturally tighter than their Canadian counterparts in part because South Korea has a very tight national culture (Dastmalchian et al., 2000). Contrary to this typical formation of team tightness, we extend this literature by suggesting that team-level communication processes (i.e., team COVID-19 talk) can also affect team cultural tightness (Gelfand et al., 2006).

Talk is socially embedded within teams, which initiates and develops within team interaction settings, rather than individual experiences (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014). Team crisis talk, as a specific interaction pattern among team members during or after crises, includes sets of actions and serves a number of purposes (e.g., sharing knowledge or directing attention; Stachowski et al., 2009). For example, when facing a crisis, Employee A may express a warning within the team. Such a warning may induce others (e.g., Employee B) to share more information about this crisis, which eventually leads to a team-level discussion (Stachowski et al., 2009). That is, while it may be initiated by one employee, team crisis talk is socially embedded within teams. We posit that team COVID-19 talk is positively linked to team cultural tightness. Specifically, talking about COVID-19 among team members makes external threats salient, which is positively associated with team members' perceptions of a need to coordinate for survival. When team members frequently talk about COVID-19 within their teams, a meaningful message is conveyed and shared among team members: COVID-19 constitutes a salient threat. This threat is perceived both in the specific sense of life versus death and in the abstract sense of business survival. This salient threat suggests to team members that they must establish strong shared social norms to ensure order and adopt preventative approaches so they can survive (Gelfand et al., 2011). For example, after talking about the new daily confirmed cases in ones' city, team members may ask each other to wear mask and maintain social distancing. These norms are clearly communicated and may even be formally instituted as rules within teams and organizations. Violations of these clearly communicated norms will be met with social sanctions and punishments. Through these repeated social interactions, team members' behaviors become "amplified and manifested in higher level collective phenomena" (Gelfand et al., 2006, p. 1234).

Because past research on cultural tightness has almost exclusively focused their unit of analysis at the nation level, empirical research supporting the link between team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness is scant. However, other psychological theories converge

to provide indirect support for such a hypothesis. For example, terror management theory suggests that talking about events related to death can increase mortality salience (Greenberg et al., 1997), which increases the defense of in-group cultural norms (Rosenblatt et al., 1989) and group affiliation (Castano et al., 2002), and in turn would likely lead to formation of a tight team culture. Similarly, research on threat-rigidity suggests that when exposed to external threats, a threat-avoidance mechanism promotes team members to create strong pressures toward uniformity and rely on leaders (Staw et al., 1981; Yam et al., 2020). Integrating these rationales, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Team COVID-19 talk is positively related to team cultural tightness.

The Effect of Team Cultural Tightness on Team Deviance and Team Creativity

According to cultural tightness–looseness theory, teams with a tight culture value predictability and homogeneity, whereas loose teams condone ambiguity and heterogeneity (Gelfand et al., 2006). At the nation level, research has indeed found that cultural tightness is negatively associated with creative outputs but is positively associated with social orders (Jackson et al., 2019). Accordingly, we posit that team cultural tightness shapes team norm-breaking behaviors (e.g., deviance and creativity) to protect teams from external threats.

Team Deviance

With more situational constraints and structured situations, a tight culture has a low tolerance for deviance and punishment is more severe against violators because deviance threatens teams' stability and coherence, leading teams to be more vulnerable to external threats (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011). Influenced by team cultural tightness, members are more likely to exhibit a higher level of self-control and refrain from deviance (Gelfand et al., 2011). Over time, they are more likely to internalize these norms so that norm adherence becomes effortless and no longer requires as much self-control (Lian et al., 2017). These processes, in turn, likely reduce team deviance.

Hypothesis 2: Team COVID-19 talk has a negative indirect effect on team deviance via team cultural tightness.

Team Creativity

Creativity is a process of exploring the unknown and often requires teams to deviate from norms (Brenkert, 2009). Research has revealed a negative association between creativity and rule adherence (Ng & Yam, 2019). In culturally tight teams, these norm violations are likely to be met with sanctions, so team members are unlikely to pursue creativity (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). Furthermore, in line with research on threat-rigidity, when exposed to salient external threats, teams exhibit strong preferences for conformity and reaching consensus, which further prohibit the development of novel ideas (Staw et al., 1981). Therefore, even though creativity is generally considered to be beneficial for teams, being creative is not encouraged in teams with tight culture. Although research on the effects of team cultural tightness on creativity is scarce, Harrington and Gelfand (2014) found that cultural tightness at the state level is negatively related to creativity, innovation, and level of openness among the 50 U.S. states. We suggest that these effects are likely to be observed at the team level as well. For example, when an employee in a tight culture has a creative idea, he or she will likely be less vocal about the creative idea with the hope to not deviate from established group norms. Even if he or she does voice the creative idea to teammates and leaders, they are more likely to forgo the creative idea because implementing creative ideas necessitates departures from established group norms.

Hypothesis 3: Team COVID-19 talk has a negative indirect effect on team creativity via team cultural tightness.

The Moderating Effect of Team Virtuality

We further suggest that team virtuality is an important boundary condition that could weaken the positive relationship between team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness. The primary reason is that virtual forms of interaction contain lower levels of interaction richness in terms of facial expression, tone, body language, etc. (Chandler & Munday, 2011; Derks et al., 2008). The absence of these nonverbal cues leads to ambiguity in intention, lack of emotional intensification, lower self-disclosure, and less mimicry among members (Brodsky, 2020). Indeed, numerous studies have found that virtual communication (e.g., emails, online chat, etc.) is less effective for building relationships, mutual understanding, and disseminating information vis-à-vis in-person communication (Barkhi et al., 1999; Foster et al., 2015; Martins et al., 2004). In the context of team COVID-19 talk, face-to-face communication can communicate the salience of threats and mortality much more effectively and authentically compared to other forms of communication medium. Thus, when teams use less virtual communication tools with their teammates, team COVID-19 talk would be more likely to form a tight team culture. Taken together, low levels of team virtuality are likely to make the threats of COVID-19 fostered by team COVID-19 talk more salient, thus strengthening the relationship between team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness.

Hypothesis 4: Team virtuality moderates the positive relationship between team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness such that this relationship is positive and stronger when team virtuality is low.

Combining our logic, we propose the following moderated mediation hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Team virtuality moderates the negative indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team deviance via team cultural tightness such that the indirect effect is negative and stronger when team virtuality is low.

Hypothesis 6: Team virtuality moderates the negative indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team creativity via team cultural tightness such that the indirect effect is negative and stronger when team virtuality is low.

Method

We collected multisource, three-wave data in Southern China. In the first wave of data collection (i.e., April 20, 2020), the cities in which data were collected had stabilized in terms of COVID-19 infection, thus enabling this data collection. All employees in the sample worked full time, and many were offered the option to work from home and interact with each other by virtual tools. Through informal conversations with most team leaders, they acknowledged that their team members work interdependently as a team on most tasks, thereby justifying our decision to treat our data at the team level. Initially, we sent 200 email invitations that described the study (purposes, requirements, and confidentiality) to alumni, who voluntarily joined the alumni associations of three universities. A total of 116 supervisors who were alumni themselves, had at least three subordinates, and only led one team, agreed to participate and provided us with a full list of their employees and contact information. To ensure team representativeness (Hirschfeld et al., 2013), we randomly and independently invited four employees (or three employees for teams with only three members) from each team to participate, and a total of 425 employees participated. We used identification codes to match team members' and their supervisors' survey responses across the three waves to ensure confidentiality. Each of the three waves was separated by one week. At Time 1 (T1), employees rated team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness, and reported demographic information (for a response rate of 92.5%). At T2, we only sent questionnaires to employees who completed T1 surveys and asked them to rate team cultural tightness again (for a response rate of 93.6%). At T3, supervisors rated their teams' virtuality, deviance, and creativity.

After matching the data from both subordinates and supervisors across the three waves, we obtained a final sample of 351 employees (M_{age} = 31.0, 48.4% female, 91.2% had a bachelor's degree) and 103 supervisors (M_{age} = 34.5, 37.9% female, 96.1% had a bachelor's degree; for a final response rate of 82.6% and 88.8% for employees and supervisors, respectively). The average team size was 12.5, ranging 3–42. A total of 64 teams (62.1%) had fewer than 11 members; 22 teams (21.4%) had between 11 and 20 members; and 17 teams (16.5%) had more than 20 members. Participants were all white-collar employees from different departments, including technology (40.5%), administration (14.0%), finance (9.4%), marketing (7.1%), and others (29.1%). Employees and supervisors in our final sample were not significantly different in terms of demographics, COVID-19 talk, and cultural tightness from those who were excluded from the analyses ($ps > .10$).[2]

Measure

Unless otherwise specified, all scales were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). We followed the standard back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980) to translate English scales into Mandarin Chinese. All scale items are available in Appendix.

Team COVID-19 Talk (T1)

We adapted five items to reflect our definition of team COVID-19 talk based on Baer et al.'s (2018) unfairness talk scale.[3] Participants rated the frequency of COVID-19 talk within their teams (1 = *Almost never*, 5 = *Almost always*; α = .92). As employees' ratings were aggregated to the team level, to justify aggregation, we computed within-group interrater agreement ($r_{wg(j)}$; James et al., 1993) and intraclass correlation (ICC) values. The mean $r_{wg(j)}$ of team COVID-19 talk was .88, ranging .21–1.00. Both the F-test and intraclass correlations produced acceptable values, $F[102, 248] = 1.94$, $p < .01$; ICC[1] = .22; ICC[2] = .48.

Team Cultural Tightness (T2)

We measured team cultural tightness by adapting the six-item cultural tightness scale developed by Gelfand et al. (2011) to the team level (α = .75). Employees' responses were aggregated to the team level, mean $r_{wg(j)}$ = .94, ranging .49–1.00; $F[102, 248] = 2.11$, $p < .01$; ICC[1] = .25; ICC[2] = .53.

Team Virtuality

We measured team virtuality with a proxy—the number of days team members work from home, as the more days team members work from home, the fewer face-to-face interactions they have and the more they have to use virtual communication at work (Maynard et al., 2012). Supervisors reported the average number of days their team members worked from home the week prior to T1 as a whole.[4] In other words, because we collected the first wave of data during the week of April 20th, supervisors reported the number of days their team members worked from home during the week of April 13th. The distribution of this variable is continuous rather than binary, ranging 0–5 days.

Team Deviance (T3)

We measured team deviance with the adapted 10-item team-level deviance scale developed by Spector et al. (2006; α = .86).

Team Creativity (T3)

We adapted Madjar et al.'s (2011) three-item scale of radical creativity to measure team creativity (α = .88).

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[2] Our research procedure complied with American Psychological Association's (APA's) policies and ethical guidelines and common Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards, even though the Chinese institutions that employ the authors in charge of data collection did not have an IRB. Particularly, we guaranteed participants' confidentiality throughout the entire research, and allowed them to withdraw from the study at any given time.

[3] According to Hinkin's (1998) suggestions, we recruited 18 experts including 13 professors and five PhD candidates in organizational behavior to evaluate the extent to which these five items matched the definition of team COVID-19 talk (i.e., team members' discussions about the contents related to COVID-19; 1 = *Item is an extremely bad match*, 5 = *Item is an extremely good match*). The average score of item match was 4.58, which is comparable to scores in previous studies (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2014; Rodell, 2013). Also, interrater agreement ($r_{wg(j)}$) among the experts was .95. Thus, these five items were well matched with the definition of team COVID-19 talk.

[4] We selected the time frame of the week prior to *T*1 in measuring work-from-home days, because the flexible work practices (e.g., working from home) are relatively stable over the study period. Indeed, at the end of the study we confirmed with each team leader that their organizations' work-from-home policy did not change during the study period.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variables	Mean (*M*)	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Team size	12.47	10.66														
2. Team average gender	0.51	0.35	.09													
3. Team average age	30.91	5.70	−.17	.11												
4. Team average education	15.87	0.99	.04	−.18	−.43**											
5. Team average dyadic tenure	3.63	2.87	−.09	.06	.50**	.01										
6. Leader gender	0.62	0.49	.22*	.19	.08	.05	.07									
7. Leader age	34.53	7.88	.22*	.05	.36**	.03	.28**	.17								
8. Leader education	16.18	1.29	−.15	−.29**	−.11	.26**	−.11	−.06	−.18							
9. Team cultural tightness (T1)	3.86	0.28	.16	.12	−.03	−.12	.07	.02	−.09	−.23*						
10. Team COVID-19 talk (T1)	3.65	0.52	.14	−.03	−.12	.07	.07	.02	−.22*	−.11	.33**					
11. Team virtuality	1.27	1.44	−.01	−.14	−.23*	.17	−.11	−.13	−.23*	.03	−.07	.02				
12. Team COVID-19 talk (T1) × Team virtuality	4.66	5.26	.00	−.15	−.22*	.17	−.10	−.13	−.27**	.03	−.01	.18	.98**			
13. Team cultural tightness (T2)	3.90	0.34	.06	.02	−.06	−.18	.04	.04	−.08	−.21*	.30**	.39**	.08	.08		
14. Team deviance (T3)	1.46	0.37	−.10	−.05	−.07	.17	−.08	−.04	−.01	.23*	−.28**	−.18	−.12	−.12	−.42**	
15. Team creativity (T3)	3.15	0.88	.00	−.03	−.16	.09	−.25*	.04	−.20*	−.04	−.02	−.10	.20*	.20*	−.28**	.16

Note. $n = 103$ teams. For gender, 0 = female, 1 = male. T1/2/3 = Time 1/2/3.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Control Variables

We controlled for team characteristics (i.e., team size, average gender, age, education, and dyadic tenure) and leader characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and education) owing to their established relationships with team cultural tightness, deviance, and creativity (Becker, 2005; Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Spector & Brannick, 2011).[5] Furthermore, in line with previous research (e.g., Del Carmen Triana et al., 2013), to verify that team COVID-19 talk has incremental effects beyond the effects of prior team cultural tightness, we also controlled for team cultural tightness in T1. We assessed it using the same cultural tightness scale described above, $\alpha = .73$; mean $r_{wg(j)} = .96$, ranging .88–1.00; $F[102, 248] = 1.76$, $p < .01$; ICC[1] = .18; ICC[2] = .43. We note that removing these controls does not affect the statistical significance of our findings, and all reported coefficient *b*s were comparable in effect size (+/−.06; see Tables S1–S3 from online supplemental materials). We also note that including team response as a dummy control does not affect the statistical significance of our findings, and all reported coefficient *b*s were comparable in effect size (+/− .13).

Analytic Strategy

To test our hypotheses, we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, given that all focal variables are at the team level. In addition, we used the PROCESS macro (V.3.5) to estimate the confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effects (i.e., PROCESS Model 4) and the first-stage moderated mediation effects (i.e., PROCESS Model 7; Hayes, 2017). As a robustness test, we further used structural equation modeling (SEM) to replicate our findings.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 1. Prior to hypothesis testing, we conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) for team COVID-19 talk (T1), team cultural tightness (T1), team cultural tightness (T2), team deviance (T3), and team creativity (T3) to ensure their discriminant validity. Team COVID-19 talk (T1), team cultural tightness (T1), and team cultural tightness (T2) were modeled at both the individual and team levels, while team deviance (T3) and team creativity (T3) were modeled at the team level. Results suggested that the theorized five-factor model, $\chi^2[528] = 764.46$, $p < .001$; CFI = .93, $SRMR_{[within]} = .03$, RMSEA = .04, fit the data better than any of the four-factor models (e.g., collapsing team COVID-19 talk [T1] and team cultural tightness [T1]; $\chi^2[534] = 1182.30$, $p < .001$; CFI = .80, $SRMR_{[within]} = .07$, RMSEA = .06; $\Delta\chi^2[6] = 417.84$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that these focal variables were distinct.

OLS regression in Table 2 revealed that, after accounting for all control variables, team COVID-19 talk had a significant and

[5] Specifically, we first controlled for team demographics because they are related to team culture, deviance, and creativity (Kim & Toh, 2019; Li et al., 2020; Madrid et al., 2016). For example, team gender composition was found to influence team interactional processes and creativity (Pearsall et al., 2008). We also controlled for leader demographics because they shape teams' culture and outcomes (Kim & Toh, 2019; Ou et al., 2014). For example, leaders' education is associated with their perceptions of deviance (Deshpande, 1997), which may in turn influence their responses of deviance.

Table 2
Results for Estimated Coefficients of the Mediation Model

Variables	Mediator: Team cultural tightness (T2)			DV: Team deviance (T3)			DV: Team creativity (T3)		
	b	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*b*	*SE*	*t*
Team size	−0.00	0.00	−0.60	−0.00	0.00	−0.63	−0.00	0.01	−0.03
Team average gender	−0.05	0.10	−0.54	0.03	0.11	0.25	−0.17	0.26	−0.67
Team average age	−0.01	0.01	−1.62	−0.00	0.01	−0.54	0.00	0.02	0.02
Team average education	−0.09	0.04	−2.35*	0.01	0.05	0.25	0.08	0.11	0.71
Team average dyadic tenure	0.01	0.01	0.77	−0.00	0.01	−0.23	−0.06	0.04	−1.69
Leader gender	0.04	0.07	0.65	−0.00	0.07	−0.06	0.19	0.18	1.06
Leader age	0.00	0.00	0.51	0.00	0.01	0.21	−0.02	0.01	−1.94
Leader education	−0.03	0.03	−1.02	0.03	0.03	0.98	−0.13	0.07	−1.79
Team cultural tightness (T1)	0.17	0.12	1.40	−0.20	0.14	−1.45	0.20	0.33	0.60
Team COVID-19 talk (T1)	0.22	0.07	3.26**	0.02	0.08	0.24	−0.11	0.19	−0.61
Team cultural tightness (T2)				−0.39	0.12	−3.32**	−0.78	0.28	−2.82**
Constant	3.90	0.03	127.08***	2.96	0.45	6.52***	6.20	1.08	5.72***
R^2	0.25			0.23			0.20		
F	3.07**			2.43*			2.10*		

Note. $n = 103$ teams. For gender, 0 = female, 1 = male. T1/2/3 = Time 1/2/3. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

positive effect on team cultural tightness ($b = .22$, $p = .002$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. We then used the PROCESS macro (Model 4) to examine the unstandardized indirect effect coefficients (a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples) pertaining to Hypotheses 2 and 3. Results revealed that the indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team deviance via team cultural tightness was significant, estimate = −.08, 95% CI = [−.17, −.03]. Likewise, the indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team creativity via team cultural tightness was significant, estimate = −.17, 95% CI = [−.36, −.05]. Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported.[6]

To test Hypotheses 4–6, we used the PROCESS macro (Model 7) to test the moderated mediation model (Tables 3 and 4). As shown in Table 3, the interaction of team COVID-19 talk and team virtuality was significant and negative in predicting team cultural tightness ($b = -.13$, $p = .001$; Figure 1). Simple slope tests indicated that the relationship between team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness was significant and positive when team virtuality was lower (−1 *SD*; $b = .44$, $t = 4.91$, $p < .001$) but not when team virtuality was higher (+1 *SD*; $b = .08$, $t = 1.06$, $p = .29$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Furthermore, for team deviance, results from PROCESS Model 7 revealed that the index of moderated mediation was significant (index = .05; 95% CI = [.01, .09]). The indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team deviance via team cultural tightness was significant and negative when team virtuality was lower (−1 *SD*; estimate = −.17; 95% CI = [−.29, −.07]) but not when team virtuality was higher (+1 *SD*; estimate = −.03; 95% CI = [−.10, .02]). For team creativity, the index of moderated mediation was likewise significant (index = .10; 95% CI = [.02, .20]). The indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team creativity via team cultural tightness was significant and negative when team virtuality was lower (−1 *SD*; estimate = −.34; 95% CI = [−.61, −.12]) but not when team virtuality was higher (+1 *SD*; estimate = −.06; 95% CI = [−.21, .04]). Thus, Hypotheses 5 and 6 were supported. Finally, for presentational parsimony, we also presented all results using SEM. The model displays a good fit to our data ($\chi^2[4] = 6.77$, $p = .15$; CFI = .96, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .08) and all hypothesized paths were significant (Figure 2; see Figure S1 for the same model without controls from online supplemental materials).

General Discussion

People often share and talk about public crises, with their family, friends, and colleagues. However, we know little about the effects of such talk on organizational behavior. In this research, we explore how societal crises and their resultant talks influence team dynamics and outcomes. Specifically, we find that team COVID-19 talk, as a manifestation of crisis talk, is positively associated with team cultural tightness, which in turn is negatively associated with team deviance and team creativity. Furthermore, these indirect effects are buffered by team virtuality.

Implications for Theory

Our research makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on communication at work and cultural tightness. First, by linking the literature on crisis talk and cultural tightness, we focus on a natural team members' response to macrocrises—talking about crises, and further investigate how and when such a talk influences team processes and outcomes. Notably, prior organizational behavior research on talk has primarily focused on personally relevant events (e.g., Baer et al., 2018), but with the COVID-19 impacting

[6] Although our main analyses focus on team (radical) creativity, we also measured team incremental creativity using Madjar et al.'s (2011) three-item measure ($\alpha = .86$). Results were not significant when team incremental creativity was modeled as a dependent variable in either the simple indirect effect or moderated mediation tests (detailed results are available from the authors upon request).

Table 3
Results for Estimated Coefficients of the Moderated Mediation Model

Variables	Mediator: Team cultural tightness (T2)			DV: Team deviance (T3)			DV: Team creativity (T3)		
	b	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*b*	*SE*	*t*
Team size	−0.00	0.00	−0.73	−0.00	0.00	−0.63	−0.00	0.01	−0.03
Team average gender	−0.05	0.09	−0.53	0.03	0.11	0.25	−0.17	0.26	−0.67
Team average age	−0.01	0.01	−0.99	−0.00	0.01	−0.54	0.00	0.02	0.02
Team average education	−0.10	0.04	−2.58*	0.01	0.05	0.25	0.08	0.11	0.71
Team average dyadic tenure	0.01	0.01	0.49	−0.00	0.01	−0.23	−0.06	0.04	−1.69
Leader gender	0.05	0.06	0.78	−0.00	0.07	−0.06	0.19	0.18	1.06
Leader age	0.00	0.00	0.63	0.00	0.01	0.21	−0.02	0.01	−1.94
Leader education	−0.02	0.03	−0.66	0.03	0.03	0.98	−0.13	0.07	−1.79
Team cultural tightness (T1)	0.21	0.12	1.82	−0.20	0.14	−1.45	0.20	0.33	0.60
Team COVID-19 talk (T1)	0.27	0.06	4.17***	0.02	0.08	0.24	−0.11	0.19	−0.61
Team virtuality	0.02	0.02	0.90						
Team COVID-19 talk (T1) × Team virtuality	−0.13	0.04	−3.42**						
Team cultural tightness (T2)				−0.39	0.12	−3.32**	−0.78	0.28	−2.82**
Constant	3.91	0.03	134.88***	2.96	0.45	6.52***	6.20	1.08	5.72***
R^2	0.35			0.23			0.20		
F	4.01***			2.43*			2.10*		

Note. $n = 103$ teams. For gender, 0 = female, 1 = male. T1/2/3 = Time 1/2/3. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

everyone globally, it affords us a unique opportunity to examine the effects of crisis talk on team outcomes. We provide evidence that team COVID-19 talk, which is a manifestation of crisis talk, is a mixed blessing. Importantly, pundits have forecasted that crises will likely occur more frequently in the near future (e.g., due to climate change; Loria, 2018). By studying crisis talk in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our work provides a first step in understanding how talking about macrocrises affects team processes and outcomes. In other words, while our data were collected during COVID-19, its implications are much broader than COVID-19 and can be applied to future crises that the world might face. Overall, by responding to Kazak (2020)'s call to better understand COVID-19's impacts, our research links talking about major societal events (i.e., a global pandemic) to team processes and outcomes. Relatedly, our research contributes to the communication literature more generally by providing a new team culture perspective to explore the consequences of talking about other important societal events that might be threatening such as race- or terrorism-related events (Sue, 2013; Torabi & Seo, 2004).

Second, virtually all extant research on cultural tightness focuses on the nation or state level within nations (Gelfand et al., 2011; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014), while little attention has been paid to lower levels of analysis (e.g., team level; for an exception, see Kim & Toh, 2019). We answer Gelfand et al.'s (2006) call for more research on antecedents and consequences of cultural tightness in organizations. Thus, our research contributes to the cultural tightness literature by revealing that cultural tightness also can be formed within teams and the effects of cultural tightness appear to be isomorphic across levels, which is critical to extend the application of cultural tightness–looseness theory to lower levels of analysis (e.g., teams, etc.). Moreover, past research has revealed that cultural tightness is a double-edged sword for some macrosocietal indicators at the nation level (Jackson et al., 2019), our work also echoes these findings, from a microbehavioral perspective, in that cultural tightness as a result of COVID-19 talk has both positive (i.e., decreased team deviance) and negative (i.e., decreased team creativity) implications for teams. Also, whereas past research has often suggested that an organization's or a team's cultural tightness is frequently formed via a top-down process (i.e., nations affect organizations, which affect teams; Gelfand et al., 2006; Kim & Toh, 2019), we introduce a novel and important team level antecedent of team cultural tightness—team crisis talk. These findings suggest that, beyond objective threats as a result of the crises, threat salience fostered by crisis talk can also promote the formation of team cultural tightness. Furthermore, we contribute to the cultural

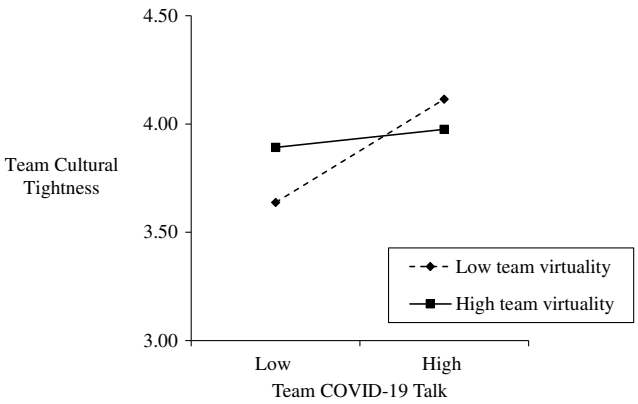
Table 4
Summary of Indirect Effects and Conditional Indirect Effects

Paths and effects	Estimates	*SE*	95% confidence intervals
Team COVID-19 talk (T1) → Team cultural tightness (T2) → Team deviance (T3)			
Simple indirect effect	−.08	.04	[−.17, −.03]
Moderated mediation			
Lower team virtuality (−1 *SD*)	−.17	.06	[−.29, −.07]
Higher team virtuality (+1 *SD*)	−.03	.03	[−.10, .02]
Index of moderated mediation	.05	.02	[.01, .09]
Team COVID-19 talk (T1) → Team cultural tightness (T2) → Team creativity (T3)			
Simple indirect effect	−.17	.08	[−.36, −.05]
Moderated mediation			
Lower team virtuality (−1 *SD*)	−.34	.12	[−.61, −.12]
Higher team virtuality (+1 *SD*)	−.06	.06	[−.21, .04]
Index of moderated mediation	.10	.05	[.02, .20]

Note. $n = 103$ teams. T1/2/3 = Time 1/2/3.

Figure 1

The Moderating Role of Team Virtuality on the Relationship Between Team COVID-19 Talk and Team Cultural Tightness



tightness literature by exploring a boundary condition under which team crisis talk is associated with a tighter or looser team culture. These findings not only offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of crisis talk on team cultural tightness, but also highlight the importance of taking team factors into account.

Implications for Practice

The present study also provides important practical insights for organizations. First, because a tight team culture as a result of team COVID-19 talk can constrain norm-violating behaviors regardless of whether the behavior is detrimental or beneficial, it is important for team leaders to recognize this tradeoff. For example, leaders of teams that value creativity (e.g., R&D) may offer social support and practical assistance as means to reduce the anxiety associated with COVID-19, which might in turn reduce COVID-19 talk. Meanwhile, leaders of teams that value compliance (e.g., audit) may want to take measures to encourage more COVID-19 talk. It is worth noting that, while it is relatively difficult for leaders to directly control what their teams might talk about, leaders could serve as "role models" to influence the talk content and frequency to some extent. Based on their team goals, leaders could initiate (e.g., make announcements), send out materials that trigger COVID-19 talk, even offer space and time for employees to discuss such issues, or redirect team members' focus to job-related conversations. Similarly, it is also important for employees to be aware of the consequences of team COVID-19 talk and monitor themselves in teams. For example, when being informed of the constraining indirect effect of team COVID-19 talk on team creativity via cultural tightness, employees from teams that emphasize creativity may want to prevent such talk on their own.

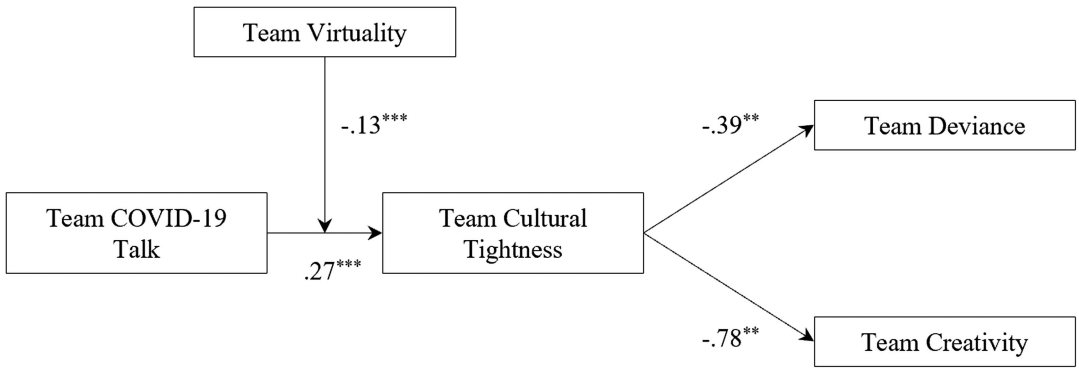
Second, our results show that the impacts of COVID-19 talk on team cultural tightness are alleviated by team virtuality. Although leaders might sometimes be unable to control what their followers discuss, they can encourage team members to work from home, which increases team virtuality, in order to minimize COVID-19 talk's negative impacts on team creativity via cultural tightness. Furthermore, as we progress toward the "new normal," telecommuting might be the norm rather than the exception in the future. With this in mind, if team members prefer to work in the office, leaders should clearly communicate not only convergence and compliance with code of conduct but also divergence and risk taking outside of the moral domain. Doing so may help to foster both ethical and innovative workplace behaviors.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Although the current research has a variety of strengths (e.g., a multisource, three-wave design), there are also several limitations. First, given the correlational nature of our study, we are unable to draw definitive causal inferences (e.g., tight team may be more likely to talk about COVID-19). As such, we recommend future research to replicate our model using a field experimental design. Relatedly, the talk literature implies that the content of talk rather than talk per se is more important in determining the consequences of talk (Reis et al., 2010; Yam et al., 2018), and talk per se is not necessarily positively related with rule building and formation process. Nevertheless, we suggest future research to take general

Figure 2

The Entire Moderated Mediation Model by Structural Equation Modeling



Note. Fit indices: $\chi^2(4) = 6.77$, $p = .15$; CFI = .96, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .08. All control variables in PROCESS were included in SEM and were controlled in both first and second stages. Unstandardized coefficients are reported.

talk into account when exploring content-specific talks.[7] Furthermore, other aspects of crisis talk including the valence of the talk and the levels of self-disclosure in team COVID-19 talk might influence the results. For example, negatively- (vs. positively-) valanced, or high (vs. low) levels of self-disclosure COVID-19 talk is likely to make external threats even more salient (Baumeister et al., 2001; Laurenceau et al., 1998), further enhancing the development of a tight team culture. Relatedly, potential second stage moderators that can mitigate the decreased creativity as a result of cultural tightness without increasing deviance should be explored in future research.

Second, since team virtuality was reported by leaders, it might reflect leaders' attitudes toward their subordinates (e.g., trust). We note that, during this pandemic, team leaders had limited discretion in deciding who are eligible to or how many days team members could work from home. Along the same line, work from home might heighten team members' levels of job control, which might weaken the relationship between team COVID-19 talk and team cultural tightness (Sonnentag & Spychala, 2012). Thus, we welcome future research to further rule out these alternative explanations. Also, we measured only one aspect (i.e., team work-from-home days) of team virtuality. Future research might consider including other dimensions of team virtuality to replicate our findings.

Third, we took a design approach to ensure representativeness and randomly invited three or four employees from each team to participate, while team size varied up to 43. To rule out this possible sampling issue, we coded a continuous variable (i.e., team sample ratio: the number of team members who participated/the number of all team members), included it as a control variable, and reran the analyses. Results including team sample ratio as a control variable were comparable (i.e., all reported coefficient *b*s were comparable in effect size [+/− .13]). Nevertheless, we welcome future research to replicate our findings with samples that are more representative.

Fourth, the ICC[2] of team COVID-19 talk (i.e., .48) was low (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), yet comparable to those reported in previous team studies (e.g., Liao & Chuang, 2007; Myers, 2020; Porter, 2005; Qin et al., 2019). Although this may reflect our relatively small team size (i.e., 3.4; Beal & Dawson, 2007; Bliese, 1998) and five-point scales, it is a limitation of our study. Beyond these statistical reasons, it is plausible that employees may have disagreements about what constitutes team COVID-19 talk. For example, some people might consider talking about COVID-19's indirect impacts (e.g., the failing businesses near work) as parts of COVID-19 talk while others do not. We encourage future research to be mindful of these statistical and substantive possibilities that might contribute to low ICC values should they decide to use our measure of COVID-19 talk.

Finally, our sample was from China, which is commonly regarded as having a tight culture (Chua et al., 2019), and the results might be stronger in culturally loose countries. Because culturally loose countries are generally less likely to face external threats (Gelfand et al., 2011), and when presented with one, such threats or talking about such threats might be more salient and thus lead to a more drastic increase in cultural tightness. That said, our findings might be conservative as teams within loose national cultures might experience a more dramatic increase in cultural tightness as a result of crisis talk. In addition, different kinds of crisis might have different ranges of influence, levels of severity, durations, relevance to oneself, and relevance to mortality. These dimensions of crisis situations are likely to moderate the impacts of team crisis talk on team cultural tightness. For example, compared with COVID-19 talk, talking about a drought may be less likely to be associated with cultural tightness because it usually has a direct impact on some people for a relatively limited amount of time. Thus, when generalizing our findings to other crises, it is important to consider the relevant characteristics of crisis situations.

Conclusion

In this research, we find that talking about crises can have important implications for team dynamics and behaviors in the workplace. We hope our work not only provides a better understanding of the roles of talking about crises but also offers insights for future research to explore how crises and related coping behaviors might affect organizational behavior.

[7] Also, as an anonymous reviewer suggested, we collected individual-level data to test the distinct predictive power between COVID-19 talk and general talk on cultural tightness. Specifically, we recruited 129 employees online and measured COVID-19 talk ($\alpha = .73$), cultural tightness ($\alpha = .73$), and general talk (using the same six-item COVID-19 talk scale without referencing to COVID-19; $\alpha = .92$). Regression results revealed that, after controlling for the general talk ($b = -.01$, $p = .91$), COVID-19 talk was still significantly related to cultural tightness ($b = .26$, $p < .001$). These findings provide some supporting evidence that COVID-19 talk explains variance in culture tightness above and beyond general talk.

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Appendix

Scale Items Used in the Study

Team COVID-19 talk

(1) My team members talk about COVID-19.

(2) My team members share stories with each other about COVID-19.

(3) My team members chat with each other when they get news about COVID-19.

(4) My team members communicate with each other about the COVID-19 situation.

(5) My team members give each other examples of how COVID-19 is going.

Team cultural tightness

(1) There are many social norms that members are supposed to abide by in our team.

(2) In our team, there are very clear expectations for how members should act in most situations.

(3) Members agree upon what behaviors are appropriate versus inappropriate in most situations in our team.

(4) Members in our team have a great deal of freedom in deciding how they want to behave in most situations. (Reverse coded)

(5) In our team, if someone acts in an inappropriate way, others will strongly disapprove.

(6) Members in our team almost always comply with social norms.

Team deviance

(1) The members in my team purposely waste the employer's materials/supplies.

(2) The members in my team complain about insignificant things at work.

(3) The members in my team tell people outside the job what a lousy place they work for.

(4) The members in my team come to work late without permission.

(5) The members in my team stay home from work and say they are sick when they aren't.

(6) The members in my team insult someone about their job performance.

(7) The members in my team make fun of someone's personal life.

(8) The members in my team ignore someone at work.

(9) The members in my team start an argument with someone at work.

(10) The members in my team insult or made fun of someone at work.

Team creativity

(1) The members in my team are a good source of highly creative ideas.

(2) The members in my team demonstrate originality in their work.

(3) The members in my team suggest radically new ways to achieve performance.

Received June 7, 2020
Revision received March 3, 2021
Accepted March 16, 2021 ■