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Champions in the time of COVID-19: tracing paths to recovery in Ibero-America

Adalides in tiempos del COVID-19: Marcando el camino de recuperación en Ibero-América

Líderes em tempos de COVID-19: abrindo caminhos para a recuperação na Ibero-América

Received 30 June 2020
Revised 27 July 2020
Accepted 27 July 2020

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to analyze the case of Ximena Aguilera, a prominent Chilean epidemiologist, as an exemplar of a champion in times of COVID-19 in Ibero-America. We also refine our understanding of the nature of a champion facing wicked problems.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors use qualitative case analysis to examine Aguilera's actions in response to COVID-19 and compare her actions with the characteristics of an emerging theory of champions facing wicked problems.

Findings – This study builds iteratively upon prior analysis of gender equality champions and finds that the depth, scope and leverage of embracement of champions in times of COVID-19 are parallel to those of gender equality champions. The authors also discuss the findings from the perspective of wicked problems.

Research limitations/implications – Future qualitative and quantitative work is needed to examine the boundaries of the theory of champions facing wicked problems across a wider range of problem domains and in a wider population of champions.

Practical implications – Wicked problems can occur in multi-level organizational structures, and understanding the characteristics of individuals best-suited to contribute to the definition and solution of these problems is relevant to organizational selection, development, policy and practices.

Management Research: Journal of the Iberoamerican Academy of Management
1536-5433
DOI 10.1108/MRJIAM-06-2020-1064

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Social implications – Many of the society's greatest challenges are defined as wicked problems, so understanding the champions of wicked problems is critical for public policy and societal advancement efforts. The nature of wicked problems is considered, and the implications of champions of wicked problems for society are discussed.

Originality/value – This work offers an in-depth examination of a champion facing a wicked problem, here the COVID-19 pandemic, while the crisis is ongoing. By capturing the champion's observations and experiences in real time, the authors obtain a perspective that is unique and unavailable through other methods.

Keywords Behavior, Latin America, Chile, Individuals, Human relations

Paper type Research paper

Resumen

Propósito – El propósito de este estudio es analizar el caso de Ximena Aguilera, una destacada epidemióloga chilena como ejemplo singular de una adalid enfrentando COVID-19 en Iberoamérica. También perfilamos nuestra visión de la condición de una adalid enfrentando un problema complejo y de difícil solución.

Metodología – Utilizamos el análisis de un caso cualitativo para examinar las acciones de Ximena Aguilera en respuesta al COVID 19. Comparamos sus acciones con las características de una teoría emergente de adalides enfrentando problemas complejos.

Resultados – Este estudio se fundamenta en forma reiterativa en un análisis previo de adalides de igualdad de género y encuentra que la profundidad, alcance y efectividad del acogimiento de los adalides enfrentando COVID-19 es similar a la de aquellos adalides de igualdad de género. También analizamos los resultados bajo la perspectiva de los problemas complejos.

Originalidad – Este trabajo ofrece un análisis profundo de una adalid enfrentando un problema complejo, la pandemia del COVID-19, estando la crisis en curso. Al captar las observaciones y experiencias de una adalid en tiempo real, logramos una perspectiva que es única y que no está disponible a través de otros métodos.

Limitaciones/implicaciones de la investigación – Se requiere en el futuro de investigación cualitativa y cuantitativa para analizar los límites de la teoría de adalides enfrentando problemas complejos a través de un rango más amplio de problemas y en una población más extensa de adalides.

Implicaciones Prácticas – Los problemas complejos pueden presentarse en estructuras organizacionales de niveles múltiples y entender las características de quienes son más aptos para contribuir a la definición y solución de estos problemas, resulta importante para la selección y el desarrollo de normas y prácticas organizacionales.

Implicaciones Sociales – Muchos de los más grandes retos de la sociedad son definidos como problemas complejos, por lo que, para las normas públicas y los esfuerzos de avance social, es fundamental entender a los adalides enfrentando problemas complejos. Consideramos la naturaleza de los problemas complejos y también discutimos las implicaciones de los adalides de problemas complejos para la sociedad y la práctica de la gestión.

Palabras claves – Comportamiento, Latinoamerica, Chile, Individuos, Relaciones humanas

Tipo de investigación – Trabajo de investigación

Resumo

Objetivo – O objetivo deste estudo é analisar o caso de Ximena Aguilera, uma epidemiologista chilena, como um exemplar único de uma líder em tempos de Covid-19 na Iberoamérica. Nós também aprimoramos nosso entendimento sobre a natureza de uma profissional lider que enfrenta soluções para um problema considerado complexo.

Metodologia – Nós usamos uma análise de caso quantitativa para examinar as ações de Ximena Aguilera no combate à COVID-19. Nós comparamos suas ações com as características de uma teoria emergente de líderes que enfrentam problemas complexos.

Resultados – Este estudo utiliza análises prévias de estudos anteriores de igualdade de gênero e descobre que o profundidade, âmbito e a influência do acolhimento de líderes em tempos de COVID-19 são paralelos aos de igualdade de gênero. Neste estudo também discutimos os resultados sob a perspectiva de problemas considerados complexos.

Originalidade – Este trabalho oferece um estudo profundo de uma líder que enfrenta um problema complexo, como a pandemia global chamada COVID-19, enquanto a crise da pandemia acontece. Através das observações e experiências obtidas pela líder em tempo real, conseguimos obter uma perspectiva única e indisponível de se conseguir por outros métodos.

Limitações e implicações da pesquisa – é preciso que se façam futuros trabalhos quantitativos para se examinar os limites da teoria de líderes que enfrentam problemas complexos, através de um escopo maior do problema em uma população mais abrangente de líderes que buscam soluções para problemas complexos.

Implicações práticas – problemas complexos podem ocorrer em estruturas organizacionais de vários níveis. O entendimento das característica de individuos melhor qualificados que possam contribuir para a definição e solução de tais problemas é de extrema relevância para a seleção, desenvolvimento, regras e práticas organizacionais.

Implicações sociais – Muitos dos maiores desafios de nossa sociedade são chamados problemas complexos ou de difíceis soluções. Assim sendo, o entendimento das ações dos líderes que enfrentam esses problemas é crítico para as diretrizes de políticas públicas e esforços sociais avançados para se combater o problema. A natureza desses problemas é considerada neste estudo bem como as implicações das ações dos líderes desses problemas para a sociedade, sendo que práticas gerenciais são particularmente discutidas.

Palavras-chave – Comportamento, América Latina, Chile, Indivíduos, Relações Humanas

Tipo de trabalho – Trabalho de pesquisa

In the midst of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many fear that they or others close to them will contract the virus, become suddenly unemployed or grieve the death of close family and friends (Chenneville and Schwartz-Mette, 2020). Another group, including those living with grief or fear, face the virus indirectly. They treat the ill, research potential treatments or vaccines, feed the unemployed or analyze data and propose guidelines contributing to the well-being of entire communities and countries around the world. Unfortunately, we know very little about the many groups and individuals trying to find solutions to the challenges generated by exposure to this virus. In this paper, we reflect on a subgroup of individuals facing the virus day-in and day-out, their expertise, sacrifices, struggles and dreams as they shape recommendations to decision-makers with wide implications for society. We label this subgroup of individuals as "champions," which we define as persons whose depth, scope and leverage of embracement to solve COVID-19 problems contribute to building a better world for all.

We have some understanding of champions in various organizational domains, including organizational ethics, human resources, organizational change, entrepreneurship, champion-driven leadership and innovation (Chakrabarti, 1974; Chen *et al.*, 2020; de Vries, 2015; Howell *et al.*, 2005; Kanter, 1981; Maidique, 1980; Schön, 1965; Taylor *et al.*, 2011; Ulrich, 1997). More generally, the leadership literature also informs champions by offering conceptualizations and empirical evidence of leaders in social transformation processes, including those involving wicked problems (cf., Alford and Head, 2017; Caulfield and Brenner, 2020; Fiol *et al.*, 1999; Grint, 2010; Herold *et al.*, 2008; House and Aditya, 1997). Although this literature points to characteristics of champions, it does not explain the connotation of champions amid a wicked problem such as COVID-19. Defined as highly complex, systemic and involving public–private and profit–nonprofit interests (Eden and Wagstaff, 2020; Rittel and Webber, 1973; van Tulder, 2018), wicked problems bind COVID-19 challenges.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the characteristics of champions, particularly those facing COVID-19, which have been observed since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic on March 11, 2020. We respond to the following critical

questions: What are the characteristics of champions facing this type of wicked problem? What dimensions explain these characteristics? How do these individuals enact their role? And, how do their roles as champions facing COVID-19 inform the characteristics of champions of other societal wicked problems? These research questions deserve special attention in a world turned upside down, in which political, economic and community leaders must embrace the help of a large and varied set of stakeholders (Amis and Janz, 2020), including champions, who provide informed decisions to issues that matter to all.

At an unprecedented moment in time and considering the nature of the COVID-19 events, we turn to an emerging perspective of champions recently advanced regarding a different wicked problem, namely, gender equality (Eden and Wagstaff, 2020; Wagstaff *et al.*, 2020). Adopting a qualitative, positivist perspective (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019), we draw from this emergent theory and apply it to the analysis of a case study of one champion in the time of COVID-19 to examine the characteristics of individuals currently tracing the path to recovery from this pandemic. Case analyses provide rich empirical descriptions of phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) and are instrumental to exploring and discovering the thinking and doings of champions in the midst of uncertain and complex circumstances.

In the following sections, we present a case analysis of Ximena Aguilera, a Chilean epidemiologist. A brief biography of Aguilera reveals that she consulted with the WHO when it faced the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, a virus that affected more than 8,000 individuals in 26 countries around the world (World Health Organization, 2020). She worked on the staff of the Pan-American Health Organization coordinating the response to the AH1N1 pandemic in 2009, a virus spreading rapidly to 74 countries around the world by June 2009 (World Health Organization, 2010). She also managed cholera and dengue outbreaks when working for the Chilean Ministry of Health in the early 1990s and 2000s (Ministerio de Salud, 2015; Organización Mundial de La Salud, 2020). Given her extensive experience in dealing with infectious diseases around the world, Aguilera coordinates the advisory committee to the current Chilean government in a community service capacity and provides weekly recommendations for facing COVID-19-related challenges. Thanks to the theoretical sampling strategy we adopted in selecting Aguilera for the analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), her case will help us reveal and delineate the characteristics of a champion in the time of COVID-19. In such extreme circumstances, Aguilera is a rare case, a remarkable figure in the Chilean landscape, as revealed by interviews and references to her published in important news outlets around the world (*Revista Ya*, 2020; The Guardian, 2020; The Washington Post, 2020). In addition, this case contributes to Ibero-American research scholarship by providing insights into how to manage wicked problems in Ibero-American countries, developing an emerging theory and discussing tangible practical recommendations. This case showcases Chile as a laboratory for theory building, practical recommendations and a source of discoveries for comparing emergent countries in other regions of the world (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020).

We organize this paper in three sections. In the first section, we briefly introduce the characteristics of wicked problems and link this set of characteristics to the COVID-19 pandemic. We follow this presentation by introducing an emergent theory of champions of gender equality, a different type of wicked problem (Eden and Wagstaff, 2020). In the second section, we introduce the methodology implemented in this paper followed by the analysis of Aguilera's case and results. In the third and final section, we discuss the implications of our findings for society, including management practice and

theory. In terms of practice, we pay particular attention to the implications of our findings for decisions-makers at different levels of organizational settings, emphasizing the links between organizational and community decision-makers. In terms of theory, we consider how our current findings align with a prior conceptualization of champions facing wicked problems and discuss how our results align with current theoretical thinking about champions.

Coronavirus disease 2019 as a wicked problem

We started our journey putting to the test the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic has all the characteristics of a wicked problem. To test the idea of COVID-19 as a wicked problem, we examined Rittel and Webber's (1973) conceptualization of a wicked problem and compared it with the characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, one property of a wicked problem is that there is no definitive formulation. When facing a tame problem, an exhaustive formulation can be provided involving all the information needed to solve the problem. In a wicked problem such as COVID-19, too many pieces of information are unknown, such as exactly how this virus spreads or even if 6-feet (2-meter) social distancing, a requirement recently questioned by a group of researchers (cf., Prather *et al.*, 2020), properly safeguards populations from contracting the virus. Other pieces of information have emerged showing a higher risk of death across ethnic groups in the USA, with African Americans and Hispanics showing higher risk compared to Whites (Gross *et al.*, 2020) or differences in resource allocation across neighborhoods, with lower income neighborhoods having less exposure to testing (Godoy and Wood, 2020).

Second, this pandemic will not end the spread of other potential viruses even if we eventually find a solution (e.g. a treatment or vaccine) adequate to attacking and defeating COVID-19. However, such a treatment or vaccine will not solve the most profound problems presented by a pandemic, such as preventing future virus outbreaks, drafting health-related international agreements with regulations for mitigating the further spread of infectious diseases and building policies that disrupt the spread of future pools of viruses. Third, wicked problems are not true or false but good or bad. Clearly, the short-term solution for eradicating COVID-19 is a vaccine, which has all the characteristics of a true-or-false response, as scientific tests will show whether the vaccine is effective in producing immunity. However, a vaccine is a short-term solution to a most wicked problem, namely, the spread of infectious diseases, given a lack of comprehensive international agreements and health-related policies designed to prevent these types of outbreaks. This overarching issue is not a true-or-false question (here, whether or not a vaccine eradicates a disease) but one of good or bad (i.e. to what degree does it prevent or at least contain future infectious disease outbreaks).

The COVID-19 pandemic also resembles additional characteristics of wicked problems. Any solutions to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation" without chances to learn by trial-and-error (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 163). With COVID-19, we have no such chance without considering penalties in terms of lives lost. The USA alone surpassed the 100,000-death milestone by May 28, 2020 (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html), and Chile reached 275,999 confirmed cases as of June 30, 2020 (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html), ranking seventh worldwide in terms of the number of reported cases after the USA, Brazil, Russia, India, the UK and Peru.

The need to solve COVID-19 problems increases by the hour. While the deployment of effective treatments and the discovery of a vaccine dominates conversations as the clearest path to a worldwide solution, we should aim to address the problem and find solutions as

high as possible and prevent diseases from spreading in the first place. Wicked problems such as COVID-19 can be explained in many ways, and stakeholders' worldviews will contribute significantly to explaining the problem and finding a plausible resolution through interdisciplinary approaches, interorganizational partnerships, coalitions of nations working together to solve this problem or public–private partnerships (Eden and Wagstaff, 2020; MIT (Producer) 2020; Pereira *et al.*, 2020; TED Talk (Producer), 2020). Finally, unlike in science, where some seek to support or refute hypotheses (Chalmers, 1999) regarding wicked problems such as COVID-19, we do not have the luxury to be wrong as the pandemic costs many lives around the world.

Having discussed COVID-19 as a wicked problem, we next examine champions in the time of COVID-19. For this purpose, we briefly draw from an emergent theory of a different type of wicked problem, namely, gender equality (Eden and Wagstaff, 2020; van Tulder, 2018). We first turn our attention to our conceptual argument before discussing Aguilera's case because it guides our analysis and the reporting of our results and discussion (Siggelkow, 2007).

Emergent theory of champions facing wicked problems

Wagstaff *et al.* (2020) consider champions of gender equality as a function of three overarching characteristics (Tables 1-3). One of them is depth of embracement, which involves skills, motivation and opportunities geared toward improving societal standing. The second is scope of embracement, defined as encompassing advocacy, networks and support (giving and receiving). Scope of embracement channels individual thoughts and action to others, both inside and outside the organizational structure. The final characteristic is leverage of embracement, which the authors define as the pulling and pushing mechanisms enacted to shape policies and procedures applicable not only at the dyad, group and organizational level but also in countries around the world. Leverage of embracement includes strategy, power and policy as its main content domain. In the following sections, we will draw from this emergent theory by applying this set of ideas to a different type of wicked problem: the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1.
Data structure of champions facing wicked problems: depth of embracement

Gender equality		Wicked problems Across wicked-problem dimensions	COVID-19	
First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order concepts
Adapting to circumstances Balancing work and family	Skill		Skill	Adapting to circumstances
Persisting in order to succeed Driving for justice	Motivation	Depth of embracement	Motivation	Persisting in order to solve problems Driven by community well-being
Confronting inequality Seeking success to seek opportunities for others in the future	Opportunity		Resolution and engagement	Confronting the problem Seeking solutions to better communities

Gender equality		Wicked problems Across wicked-problem dimensions	COVID-19	
First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order concepts
Advocating for women employees and customers Voicing women's concerns	Advocacy		Advocacy	Advocating for the community Voicing community concerns
Building organizational connections Engaging with national and international liaisons	Network	Scope of embracement	Network	Building organizational connections Engaging with national and international liaisons
Mentoring women Giving and receiving social support	Support		Support	Mentoring Giving and receiving social support

Table 2. Data structure of champions facing wicked problems: scope of embracement

Gender equality		Wicked problems Across wicked-problem dimensions	COVID-19	
First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order concepts
Questioning the status quo Disrupting the status quo	Strategy		Strategy	Questioning the status quo Disrupting the status quo
Sensitizing Claiming power	Power	Leverage of embracement	Power	Sensitizing Claiming power
Organizing action Developing gender equality policies	Policy		Policy	Organizing action Developing policy

Table 3. Data structure of champions facing wicked problems: leverage of embracement

Methodology

Our data source for this case analysis was a one-hour, semi-structured interview conducted and recorded via Zoom on May 12, 2020. Prior to the interview and the formulation of the interview questions, we gathered information published on Ximena Aguilera in different Chilean outlets, including magazines, newspapers and video interviews by a Chilean news channel (e.g. *Revista Ya*). This research guided the formulation of the interview questions. As both are employees of the same institution (i.e. Universidad del Desarrollo), Salvaj (i.e. the second author) secured access to Ximena Aguilera via email. Salvaj's email established the first contact with our main informant, and the Zoom interview was the first face-virtual contact. After she accepted our invitation to be interviewed, we sent Aguilera the list of questions we were planning to ask her and requested permission to video-record the

interview. Aguilera did not make any changes to the questions and accepted our request to record the interview. We postponed the interview for 24 h given Aguilera's unexpected challenges in navigating a turbulent environment. Aguilera, Salvaj and Wagstaff communicated in Spanish during the entire interview. Salvaj conducted most of the interview, and Wagstaff took notes during the entire interview and only asked follow-up questions at the end of the interview as they emerged from the interview itself.

For the analysis, we first transcribed the interview from the Zoom video-recording to a Word file keeping the language in Spanish. The first two authors analyzed the interview in Spanish. To analyze the interview, we drew from Gioia *et al.* (2013). We first conducted a first-order coding of the main topics revealed by the interview. We then compared this first-order coding with the emergent theory of champions of gender equality. Next and following Gioa *et al.*'s (2013) methodology, we conducted a second-order coding and analysis, relabeling the lay terms of our first-order analysis as research-related terms. For example, during our analysis, we labeled two first-order codings as "Building organizational connections" and "Engaging with national and international liaisons," which we relabeled "Networks" in alignment with current theory. In this process, we went back-and-forth between our current findings, the emergent theory and other relevant literature. The first and second authors analyzed the interview by critically assessing each of the codes and questioning the codes until we reached complete agreement. After reaching agreement, we send the excerpts selected to a professional translator, who translated the excerpts from Spanish to English. Villanueva (i.e. the third author), who does not speak Spanish, evaluated the translated excerpts by critically assessing each code. During the analysis stage, we also consulted the guidance provided by Aguinis and Solarino (2019), Locke (2007) and Eisenhardt and collaborators (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). What follows reflects our analysis of a champion in the time of COVID-19 pandemic in Chile.

Analysis and results

We group the content of the analysis into the three key emergent aggregate dimensions of the characteristics of a champion, as suggested by Wagstaff *et al.* (2020). As we are proposing an emergent theory, we look for these aggregate dimensions, with second- and first-order coding remaining open to adding to or adjusting our original coding, which was originally proposed for a different type of wicked problem. As a single-case study, we present descriptions of each of the three aggregate dimensions. In the discussion section, we discuss how this case fits or departs from the theory of champions facing other types of wicked problems (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Depth of embracement

Depth of embracement is one of the three aggregate dimensions of our emergent theory. Consistent with prior theorizing, the first second-order theme we observed was *skill*. One aspect of skill centers on adapting to circumstances (first-order concept; Table 1). Notably, Caligiuri *et al.* (2020) pointed to adaptation as a competency needed from leaders to face the COVID-19 pandemic. In her own words, Aguilera recounts her professional adaptation to facing infectious diseases:

> "[. . .] when I started working, I didn't focus specifically on pandemics, but later on, when I joined the Ministry of Public Health, I had experience with many diseases such as the cholera outbreak. However, during the dengue outbreak, I became more involved and alert on this issue [. . .]"

During the interview, Aguilera remained within the domain of work. As a follow-up question, we asked her about the interface between work and family, which our

emergent theory pointed as the second first-order concept. Aguilera provided a general answer to this topic, which reveals that the original emergent theory should be revised if we wished to generate a theory applicable to various types of wicked problems. Perhaps the relevance of work–family issues differs depending on the type of wicked problem, individual differences in the relevance of work–family issues, cultural context or gender identity. In summary, in terms of skill, we only observed adaption to circumstances.

The second second-order theme of depth of embracement was *motivation*, which according to our emergent theory involves two first-order concepts: a) persisting in order to succeed, and b) driven by justice, or the need to attain fair treatment for all. Regarding persisting to succeed, Aguilera provided several examples, such as how she protected herself with alcohol or masks when facing cholera, dengue or SARS outbreaks as part of her ongoing interest in learning from the experience of the greatest epidemiologists in Chile with whom she worked with (e.g. Catterina Ferreccio, Aida Kirschbaum, Manuel Zuñiga and José Manuel Borgoño) and how she chased outbreaks around the world and throughout Chile. Given the risk of becoming exposed to infectious disease outbreaks, Aguilera took appropriate measures to gain the information needed to develop and implement plans for the betterment of many communities around the world. Paraphrasing her own words:

> "[. . .] I try to follow all protective measures like antibacterial gel, face mask. When I went to China [in relation to SARS] it was a more critical situation because there was no treatment for the disease and we went to the outbreak zone. It was like being in Chile now [. . .]. For example, in the dengue outbreak on Easter Island, we could have been infected by the mosquitoes, but we had repellent and it wasn't that critical. So we were exposed, but I have certainly never worried about protection measures. Maybe when I worried the most was when I went to China [. . .]"

Aguilera's narration of these various events helps us reformulate this subdimension from persisting to succeed to persisting to solve the problem. Table 1 shows a comparison between the original formulation of the emergent theory and the reformulation based on Aguilera's case. It is important to note that persistence is the characteristic of charismatic leaders facing organizational obstacles (House and Aditya, 1997). As she faces a wicked problem for which we do not yet have ultimate solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973), Aguilera portrays someone looking for the best available solution given the circumstances.

Regarding the first-order concept "driven by justice" considered by Wagstaff *et al.* (2020) to be an attribute of gender equality, we relabeled the concept to a higher-level as "driven by community well-being." Again, Aguilera provided several examples of her drive to better her community and others around the world. Reflecting on the many exposures she had to various outbreaks, such as avian influenza or the zika virus in various countries, she stated:

> "So each field experience enriches you with the different issues faced during epidemic situations and the crucial elements facing a crisis."

The third second-order theme of depth of embracement is *resolution and engagement*, which involves two first-order concepts: a) confronting the problem, in this case the pandemic, and b) reflecting or seeking solutions from other outbreak experiences in order to solve current problems. Regarding confronting the pandemic, Aguilera narrated several examples of times when she confronted outbreaks around the world, including:

> "When I took the flight from Paris to Beijing, someone said to me: Aren't you worried about traveling there? Everybody kept telling me: Are you going over there?"

She continued:

> "I would say that the experience of going to China with the WHO for one month was a remarkable experience from my professional perspective by looking at a city like Beijing being suppressed by SARS in 2003. I spent one month with the WHO mission and looked deeply into the field in a situation of a completely shut-down city whose only purpose was responding to the epidemic."

Next, consider how she drew from previous outbreak experiences to solve problems in the present one:

> "It was very important watching such methods of response in the field with traditional precautions for public health. Having seen it for real gives you ideas about what needs to be done."

As Table 1 shows, we re-labeled the two first-order concepts originally formulated by Wagstaff *et al.* (2020) to match the nature of the COVID-19 problem. In particular, confronting the problem and seeking solutions to better communities encompass both types of wicked problems. In summary, having appropriate skills to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, the motivation and drive to solve problems to increase community well-being and the resolve to act on that motivation served by appropriate skills partially portray a champion in the time of COVID-19 in Chile.

Scope of embracement

This characteristic of a champion involves three second-order themes: advocacy, network and support. *Advocacy* involves two first-order concepts: advocating for the community and voicing community concerns, in this case, health-related concerns. Consider Aguilera's words in relation to advocating for community involvement:

> "[. . .] you don't transfer the responsibility to anyone; you take responsibility and guarantee a response to something that can't have an answer."

She continues:

> "[. . .] Brazil has huge state boards where many people participate, with thousands of real participatory mechanisms I have actually seen working in the tuberculosis programs, which I personally checked with them. [This includes] participatory entities from civil society for sick groups in Rosinha, which bear no resemblance to Chile. In Chile, we are certainly not that participative. I am not aware if this is a consequence of the dictatorship, but the truth is that there are very few participatory entities."

Regarding voicing health-management problems, Aguilera stated:

> "During other outbreaks, the Ministry has organized a wider and more comprehensive advisory board. Roundtables have been organized for people that could challenge or disagree with them [Ministry officials] in any way or that may oppose the way they are responding and get them involved."

Aguilera's case contributes to delimiting the conceptualization of advocacy to a higher-level conceptualization. Advocating for the community and voicing community concerns includes not only issues related to COVID-19 but also other wicked problems such as gender equality issues.

As for *networks*, Aguilera pointed to both building organizational connections and engaging with national and international liaisons. Regarding building organizational connections, Aguilera pointed to strengthening connections within her current organizational structure:

> "[. . .] the pandemic represents an opportunity to establish a strong relationship with other ICIM [Institute of Science and Innovation in Medicine] centers. In fact, we are going to submit research projects together, and as a center, we have also had more collaboration with the university."

She builds not only national but also international connections to solve problems related to the pandemic. Consider the following national connections:

> "We also participate as a board in weekly meetings with the Senate, the Health Commission, and the future Senate Commission. [. . .]. Through the Senate Board, we have established relationships with many other entities such as the Medical Board, with the statistics people form the Ministry of Science, with education people from the Hogar de Cristo, and with other attendees at such meetings. As a result, I have been participating with the statistics people, whom I didn't know and now I find it very interesting and may become even more [interested] in the future. I hope this leads me to the production or products related with the use of track proximity technology, which would be with Alejandro Maass from the Mathematical Modeling Center of the University of Chile."

We discussed her previous international connections by pointing at Aguilera having to face different infectious deceases over the years in different international institutions and countries, including China, Vietnam, Singapore and the USA as well as across Latin America countries as the leader in responding to infectious diseases.

The third subdimension of scope of embracement relates to *support*, which includes mentoring and giving and receiving support. In terms of mentoring, Aguilera narrates the mentors that shaped her own professional identity. Here is Aguilera remembering her own mentors:

> "[. . .] there, I became more involved with this alertness and response issue as well as more connected with former professors, with old epidemiologists who had lived during the times of transmissible diseases, coworkers, and with Catterina herself, who was like my mentor at work. I didn't study with her, but she was my boss in my first job, and she trained me well. We both studied the cholera issue and then transmissible diseases, with further details."

She also mentioned how the support she received from professionals from other specializations enriched her own work:

> "Also, with infectologists, because I am an epidemiologist, my relationship with them enriched my experience."

In summary, scope of embracement relates to how a champion in the time of COVID-19 shapes responses to COVID-19 through advocacy, networks and support. As a key member of the Advisory Committee to the current government's response to the pandemic, her advocacy, the building of networks and support received indirectly shape the destiny of millions of Chilean lives.

Leverage of embracement

The third and final dimension of a champion, leverage of embracement, involves three second-order themes: strategy, power and policy (Table 3). In terms of *strategy*, Aguilera's narrative points to two first-order concepts. The first is questioning the status quo. Consider the following quote:

> "[. . .] also, the elements of epidemic control are not so distinct. There is the issue of how we control the cases and how to isolate them. Sometimes we might have vaccines and many other times we will not have vaccine at an early stage. The communication issue is crucial, and I would say this has been awfully bad in Chile, from the perspective of the response to the pandemic since risk-related communication has been weak. Besides, it has been overwhelmed by political issues. There has been a lot of issues in this country due to political problems, the social riots, and on top of that, a weak communication strategy."

The questioning of the status quo in relation to the political turbulence coincides with recent worldwide news in leading newspapers about the resignation of Chile's health minister because of the steep rise in COVID-19 cases (*The Guardian*, 2020; *The New York Times*, 2020).

The other first-order concept of strategy is disrupting the status quo. In this regard, Aguilera points to examples of channels for disrupting the status quo and building better responses to crises:

> "During the 2009 pandemic [H1N1] when President Bachelet was in the office, there was also a political commitment, but then, it was [space for discussion] organized by those who disagreed. I was in Washington but I was informed because colleagues who work with me were in charge of the pandemic response in 2009, which was severe in Chile, as it was in Argentina, and the people who could disagree were inside [the government]."

This disruption to the status quo and the invitation to build groups with diverse points of view assumes a need for integration of the various stakeholders' perspectives. This evidence relates to Caligiuri *et al.* (2020) and Amis and Janz (2020), who recently argued for integration and collaboration to handle the COVID-19 pandemic.

The other second-order theme of leverage of embracement is *power*, which involves two first-order concepts: claiming power and sensitizing. Aguilera's claim for power depicts expertise (Finkelstein, 1992; Pfeffer, 1994) or how her knowledge and skills regarding topics related to infectious diseases, all of which are currently critical to the Chilean government, influence strategic decisions. In this case, she influences strategic decisions designed and made by the Chilean government. This element also involves structural power, which builds from the position held in formal organizational structures and hierarchical authority (Finkelstein, 1992). Aguilera currently coordinates the advisory committee and has had hierarchical authority in a number of decisions within her current and past organizations. Aguilera also carries prestige power or status, with her increased reputation witnessed by various interviews conducted in major Chilean outlets in the past few months. During our interview, she also shared the names of powerful friends or acquaintances. Aguilera also conveyed power of resources, processes and meaning (Hardy, 1996). Aguilera reveals power over resources by voicing expertise in the subject matter, power over processes by coordinating the Advisory Committee, and power over meaning by informing the scope of the pandemic and providing context to the current pandemic.

In terms of sensitizing, she turns to coordinated action by experts:

> "The last weekends have been very demanding in drafting the minutes for recommendations [to the government]."

The last second-order theme of leverage of embracement is *policy*, which includes two first-order concepts: organizing action and policy development. In relation to organizing action, Aguilera refers to her past experiences when she was coordinating efforts across Latin America as a staff member of the Pan American Health Organization:

> "I had that kind of stress when I was in Washington because I oversaw the technical response of the entire Americas with regard to pandemics. There was a situation in Central America when there was not even a diagnosis and we had to bring virologists from another place. Besides, [. . .] we had to bring people from Portugal so they could visit over there and set up health clinics in each country. That was even more stressful because there, we were at the front line."

Finally, she develops policy recommendations or protocols. For example, she recently developed a protocol for the organization for which she currently works:

> "In my Center, we have also worked at creating protocols; in fact, the last protocol was done in my university."

In summary, leverage of embracement includes strategy, power and policy. Aguilera's role in the current COVID-19 pandemic touches on the three second-order themes as they have an impact across organizational settings.

Discussion

Recalling "Love in the Time of Cholera" by García Marquez, champions in the time of COVID-19 point to hope, meaning and reckoning, in this case, with a world turned upside down. We examined the characteristics of a champion in the time of COVID-19 by examining the case of Ximena Aguilera, a Chilean epidemiologist. We found that Aguilera squarely fits most of the characteristics of a champion with regard to depth, scope and leverage of embracement. Adapting to rapidly changing circumstances, driven by problem-solving to increase community well-being and having the resolve and engagement to do so represents one aspect of this rich role as champion. Another side is her scope of embracement, through which her advocacy, networks and support help her directly or indirectly shape responses to the pandemic. Special mention should be made of her national and international networks, including academic, multilateral and governmental organizations. Finally, but importantly, Aguilera also shows leverage of embracement. Her use of strategy, power and policy in the current COVID-19 pandemic substantiates her recommendations to the government and reflects her drive for community well-being in concert with a diverse set of stakeholders. Her depth, scope and leverage of embracement indirectly shape the destiny of millions of Chilean lives.

Implications for society

As a current member of the Advisory Committee to the Chilean government, Aguilera's indirect and direct impact on Chilean organizations extends beyond the advice she provides to her own organization and the Chilean government. Her drive for community well-being, expertise, national and international networks and strategic position, including her enactment as an advocate for public and concerted health management issues clears a path for collectively solving one of the most wicked problems of our lifetime. Actors such as Aguilera operate at multiple levels, including various groups (e.g. advisory committees), community (e.g. her University in relation to other institutes in Santiago), country (e.g. with the Senate) and multilateral level (e.g. across health organizations within Chile and across the world) with multi-level influences. Aguilera embodies the type of person the world needs to articulate and find solutions to wicked problems (George *et al.*, 2016), someone who in the midst of chaos sees resources, craft relationships and builds regenerative opportunities to save lives (Cooperrider and Fry, 2020).

In light of Aguilera's case and Gibson's (2020), recent guideposts on "care in connecting" involving inclusion, co-presence and vitality, Aguilera embodies these three characteristics. She highlights the need to include diverse voices in finding the best available solutions to the pandemic. She recognizes the uniqueness of individual voices, including those opposed to mainstream ones, something recently acknowledged by the new Chilean Minister of Health (The New York Times, 2020). Aguilera's position closely resembles that of strengthening a relational identity orientation in which members of organizational structures define themselves as partners to stakeholders, which in turn relates to care and trust (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). She also embodies care in connecting through co-presence by building a sense of togetherness across stakeholders and across organizational lines. Finally, she embodies care in connecting through vitality and by radiating a sense of energy and resilience during interpersonal interactions, including those taking place on-line.

Beyond COVID-19, a more general question is the following: how does Aguilera's role as champion relates to other societal wicked problems? A champion integrates a set of interrelated characteristics, creating a complex and unique system that may be difficult to find in just one person. Yet, what we found in our analysis is that Aguilera reveals, if not all, most of these characteristics. The analysis of a case related to a different type of wicked problems also pointed to very similar characteristics: depth of embracement, scope of embracement and leverage of embracement (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2020). Aguilera's case highlights her uniqueness and delineates the broad characteristics needed to confront wicked problems (Stake, 2005) such as COVID-19. In addition and through the use of generalization in a comparison exercise with a different type of wicked problem (Stake, 2005; Wagstaff *et al.*, 2020), Aguilera's case helps us demarcate the type of champion needed to deal with extremely complex problems (George *et al.*, 2016). For example, she may contribute to building capacity for collaborating and establishing broad coalitions of health associations, health experts and policymakers to respond to the many needs of our communities, including physiological, psychological and socioeconomic needs (Domínguez *et al.*, 2020). Aguilera helps us sharpen our understanding of what society, including organizational leaders and educators, needs in a champion to deal with a highly complex problem such as COVID-19, not only from a theoretical perspective (e.g. conceptualization of a champion; cf., Siggelkow, 2007) but also from a purely practical point of view.

Implications for theory

Emergent theory of champions facing wicked problems

To continue building an emergent theory of champions facing wicked problems, we follow the lead of others who consider replication logic or the view that each case serves as a distinct experiment, as a necessary step in conceptualizing this important role in the society (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Drawing from this work, we considered the case of Aguilera on its own and compared it with a completely different case, albeit one related to it in one critical domain, namely, the fact that both cases are wicked problems. By comparing and contrasting these cases, we are able to build and extend a more fine-tuned conceptualization of champions facing wicked problems (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In addition, this comparison contributes to assessing contextual certainty or the accumulation of positive evidence supporting a conclusion with no contradictory evidence (Locke, 2007).

We started our journey with one case based on a completely different type of wicked problem (i.e. gender equality) and found that most of the characteristics of a champion of gender equality hold for the case of a champion in the time of COVID-19, albeit with some exceptions. One exception is the balancing of work–family issues (see depth of embracement in Table 1). Although balancing work and family remains important in the management of gender equality (cf., Lyness and Kropf, 2005; Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017), this sub-dimension seems content-specific. In addition, balancing work and family is a particular case of a general case of adapting to circumstances. Table 1 compares the dimensions found in both wicked problems (i.e. COVID-19 and gender equality).

Another sub-dimension we revised in our current work relates to both confrontation and seeking success (see depth of embracement in Table 1). In our prior work, we identified confronting inequality as a first-order concept. In our current case, we also found confrontation, though not necessarily in inequality but in COVID-19. Therefore, we relabeled the first-order theme of confronting the problem as a higher-label construct involving both gender inequality issues and COVID-19. In addition, in relation to depth of embracement, we revised the first-order theme we originally labeled "Seeking success to create opportunities

for others in the future." In our current findings, the first-order concept emerging from our data involves seeking solutions from the past to solve the problems of the present. Regardless of the timeframe (i.e. past, present or future), champions seek solutions to better communities. Aguilera's reflections on how communities in Brazil, Chile (including Easter Island), China and Singapore are organized to defeat outbreaks show her interest in learning from other communities to improve the well-being of Chilean communities. Considering the changes we made to these two first-order concepts, we relabeled the second-order concept from "opportunity" to "resolution and engagement."

Following a similar logic, we also adapted three first-order concepts pertaining to scope of embracement (Table 1): a) Advocating for women employees and customers; b) Voicing women's concerns, and c) Mentoring women in order to represent higher-order themes that can involve different types of wicked problems. We now label these first-order concepts as a) Advocating for the community, b) Voicing community concerns, and c) Mentoring. Similarly, we changed one first-order concept related to leverage of embracement from developing gender equality policies to developing policy.

The analysis of Aguilera's case questioned and informed the connotation of first-order concepts, and we re-labeled the concepts to match the content domain. In other instances, Aguilera's case informed a more nuanced conceptualization of first-order concepts. This is the case of questioning the status quo. In prior work (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2020), questioning the status quo appears as questioning the current state of affairs and doing something about it. In the current case, questioning the status quo involves both questioning the current state of affairs and offering a path for doing things differently.

Finally, Aguilera's case also contributes to molding in a more specific way the conceptualization of other first-order concepts and slightly changing their connotation. Consider the case of mentoring and support. Aguilera reminds us that both mentoring and support functions in a bidirectional manner as both involve receiving and giving (Bowling *et al.*, 2005; Ragins, 1997). Thus, Aguilera points to the complexity of how relationships unfold over time and contribute to shaping a champion in the time of COVID-19.

Finally, our findings show the highly interrelated nature of the three aggregate dimensions: depth, scope and leverage of embracement. Each element of this emergent theory is interconnected, fueling the characteristics of champions facing wicked problems. Yet, we need additional work to reach a saturation point or the point at which new cases stop offering new insights to our conceptualization of champions (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Eisenhardt, 1989). In addition, we need to explore additional cases to assess how each component relates to every other, the weight of each component, the key mechanisms and boundary conditions (Locke, 2007).

Relationship with other theories

The characteristics of champions facing wicked problems in general and those facing COVID-19 in particular closely relate to characteristics of champions in organizational settings as developed by past scholarship. Taylor and collaborators (Taylor *et al.*, 2011) developed a theory of champion-driven leadership processes. Our work and that of Taylor *et al.* similarly points to five subdomains related to champions: motivation, power, networks, questioning the status quo and more generally engagement. This resemblance is remarkable considering that we did not consult Taylor's *et al.* model until the end of this analysis so that we could freely code the domains related to champions facing wicked problems.

However, our emergent theory diverges from Taylor's *et al.* conceptualization (2011) in two ways. First, we develop emergent theory of the properties of champions facing wicked

problems. Instead, Taylor *et al.* (2011) developed a process model of champion-driven leadership formed by three phases: initiation, endorsement and implementation. Second, the conceptualization of champions used by Taylor and collaborators differs from our own conceptualization in terms of the thresholds in which champions enact behavior and in terms of the type of drive and engagement behind the enactment of behavior. For Taylor *et al.*, champions belong to an organizational setting, and the championing is displayed within the boundaries of the organization. Our own conceptualization considers champions' actions as spreading across both organizational and national boundaries impacting the well-being of entire societies around the world. Unlike the conceptualization proposed by Taylor *et al.*, our own conceptualization of a champion in the time of COVID-19 considers the drive for community well-being and engagement in solving community-related problems as a keystone property of a champion facing a wicked problem.

Our own work also relates to work conducted on champions of innovation. Howell *et al.* (2005) developed a measure of champion behavior formed by three factors that closely align to our emergent theory: a) expressing enthusiasm and confidence, which relates to resolution and engagement; b) persisting under adversity, which relates to persistence in solving problems; and c) getting the right people involved, which relates to networks, advocacy, and support. However, we observe two differences between Howell and colleagues' conceptualization of champions and our own conceptualization. First, similar to Taylor and collaborators' model, Howell *et al.* locate the champion inside the organizational setting without considering the role of a champion as interorganizational, national or international, with worldwide societal impact. Second, they silence the role of leverage or strategy in the enactment of this role.

Our emergent theory also relates to theories of leadership focused on social transformation processes. For example, work on charismatic leadership points to nonconservative and sometimes radical change emerging in conditions of stress and crisis (Fiol *et al.*, 1999). This advocacy for change, the challenge of the status quo and the holding of substantive power (House and Aditya, 1997) also characterize champions in the time of COVID-19. However, leaders have decision-making capacity within organizational structures, whereas champions may (or may not) make decisions on behalf of the organization and may impact both organizational and interorganizational structures. In fact, Aguilera clearly stressed this difference when asked about decision-making processes. Future research may further expand on how the enactment of this advocacy, the questioning of the status quo and the power withheld by champions unfold within and across organizational and country borders. Although our own conceptualization of champions facing wicked problems in general and COVID-19 in particular differs from current scholarship, past work (Howell *et al.*, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2011) broadens and calibrates our own theory building process. We owe to past theory and empirical evidence much of our reflections on the properties of champions fueled by challenges to building healthy communities.

Limitations and future research

This paper focused on one case, a champion in the time of COVID19, as represented by Ximena Aguilera, a prominent Chilean figure. Although we drew and extended the formulation of an emergent theory of champions facing wicked problems, this article contributes to the organizational literature by further characterizing the type of actor that embodies the needs and aspirations of the collective, aligning goals toward a shared agenda of eradication of individual, sociocultural and structural barriers (George *et al.*, 2016). In future work, we must analyze champions facing other types of wicked problems such as

poverty, hunger, economic uncertainty, political confrontation and turbulence, unequal access to education, water scarcity or climate change (Bucheli and Salvaj, 2018; Bucheli *et al.*, 2019; George *et al.*, 2016; Giacomin *et al.*, 2019; van Zanten and van Tulder, 2018) to critically examine this theory by conducting empirical and conceptual replications across countries and cultures (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019).

It is important to point out that although in this piece we focus on a single case, we used emergent theory from a different type of wicked problem (i.e. gender equality) and compared our findings with those from other champions not necessarily facing wicked problems. This comparative exercise validates our own findings and emergent theory because we minimized biases related to retrospective sensemaking and biases associated with retrospective recall particularly with events related to COVID-19 (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Developing a multiple case study in the future will allow for broader exploration of theoretical and practical questions, a more robust generalizable theory, clarification of constructs, the tuning of the level of construct abstraction and elimination of idiosyncrasies (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) such as the original work–family balance connotation of one of the first-order concepts, which we observed for gender equality but did not observe in the face of COVID-19. This future work will help us further define the nature and characteristic of individuals who through their actions shape the well-being of societies around the world.

In addition, although this paper was mostly based on a single interview, we checked Aguilera's biographical information and consulted several recent and past publications as well as a video interview conducted by one of the major news channels in Chile to crosscheck our findings. We also asked Aguilera to read the final draft of our manuscript prior to publication for comments and corrections to protect her from harm (e.g. emotional; Fontana and Frey, 2003).

On a different note, a more theoretical line of future research may unfold as regard to understanding the critical dimensions of champions. A causal model of champions facing wicked problems considering antecedents, intervening and dependent variables (Locke, 2007; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2005) will be instrumental to leadership development programs to build interorganizational collaborations. Future research may determine how the dimensions we observed in two very different types of wicked problems unfold across settings and types of wicked problems.

As an emergent theory, this study will provide the foundation for other research conducted on champions of problems that go beyond infectious diseases and address other wicked problems such as the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) formulated by the United Nations in consultation with many stakeholders (United Nations, 2018).

Conclusion

In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, champions are uniquely suited to defining, analyzing and contributing to solving a wicked problem that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and threatens millions more worldwide. Wicked problems, having no definite formulation nor ultimate test and confronting issues of good and bad rather than true or false exist in almost every facet of human society, and the COVID-19 pandemic epitomizes the definition of a wicked problem. Our case analysis of the response of one champion in the time of COVID-19, noted Chilean epidemiologist Ximena Aguilera, confirms and refines our emerging theory about champions facing wicked problems.

Building upon prior work on champions of gender equality, we demonstrate that the core characteristics of champions, their depth, scope and leverage of embracement in facing wicked problems are consistent across two distinctive problem types. Using qualitative methodologies, we describe wicked problems, refine emergent theory on champions facing wicked problems and offer implications for society, management practice and theory. Despite the emerging nature of this theory, we believe that additional research on champions facing wicked problems holds great promise and suggest that future research should focus on champions facing wicked problems related to the United Nations' 17 SDGs using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies

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