

Decision making in the crisis cycle: The need for research and better understanding

Kate A. Mirandilla, Joylene Chia, and Margaret Peters

University of South Australia

Kate A. Mirandilla is the 2006 recipient of both the Donald Dyer Scholarship for Public Relations and Presidential Scholarship of the University of South Australia. Her doctoral dissertation is on organisational crisis decision making. While working on her degree, she is an active sessional staff member at the School of Communication under the Public Relations and Communication and Media Management degree programs. (kate.mirandilla@unisa.edu.au)

Dr. Joy Chia is a senior lecturer and program director of the public relations programs at the University of South Australia. Dr Chia is a PRIA Fellow, member of PRIA's national education committee and former PRIA national board member and SA, PRIA President. (joy.chia@unisa.edu.au)

Dr. Margaret Peters is the (Acting) Dean of Research and Research Education in the Division of Education Arts and Social Sciences at the University of South Australia. She is Director of the Research Centre for Gender Studies in the Hawke Research Institute where she is also a key researcher. Her corpus of work involves organisational communication and behaviour, particularly as it relates to gendered practices. She is the co editor of the 2008 Ashgate publication, *Sonic Synergies: Music, Identity, Technology, Community*. (margaret.peters@unisa.edu.au)

Abstract

Decision making is critical and integral to effective organisational management. In pre-crisis or non-crisis modes, organisations operate under intricate environments, with reputations and relationships to sustain. Once a crisis occurs, the decision makers are expected to initiate choices/actions amidst the limitations inherent during the onset of the crisis. This paper is an introduction to a qualitative study of organisational crisis decision making of members of executive teams of organisations and communication managers who played critical decision making roles in several Australian crises. Rather than engaging in a study on how decision making should be carried out, our ongoing research aims to assess how the process is (was) done. The aim is to gain a better understanding of either the effective decision-making strategies or the conditions that may lead to such, at the onset of a crisis which may directly influence the overall crisis communication management activities of the organisation throughout the crisis cycle. This paper puts forward the rationale for the research, identifies some of the research gaps in the field, summarises key literature central to the study, and provides some preliminary findings: it is a work in progress.

Introduction

Timely, strategic decision making is critical and integral to effective organisational management. In pre-crisis or non-crisis modes, organisations operate under intricate environments, with reputations, brands, and internal and external relationships to sustain. Once a crisis occurs, decision makers are expected to initiate choices/actions amidst the limitations inherent during the onset of the crisis such as constraints on information retrieval and dissemination systems, nature of human information processing itself, and the limited analytical skills of decision makers due to a variety of other situational factors (Conrad & Poole, 2005). These constraints affect the decision outcomes made in crisis periods. Heath & Coombs (2006) emphasise that choices in decision making are considered through collaboration and dialogue with “interested parties” (p.390) working together to make the decision in the best interest of all parties involved. However, Coombs (2007) cautions that some decisions will not serve the interest of every party as some parties may be apprehensive and unwilling to contribute to decision making, depending on the nature of the interests that they protect (Shapira, 1997).

Drawing from a qualitative research paradigm, our research points to an exploratory study using Weick’s sensemaking principles in understanding how decision makers (1) act, and (2) develop choices on how organisations should act, when a crisis happens. According to Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, (2005), “sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words... that serve[s] as a springboard into action” (p.409). As decision makers make sense of how to manage the crisis, they deal with the crisis in its totality. This may involve various components such as financial, operational, reputational, psychological, or legal, among others (Pearson & Clair, 1998). The study reported in this paper concentrates on the *communication* dimension of managing a crisis where the decision makers respond to the equivocality of the situation (Kreps, 2008). A critical part of Weick’s (1995a) model of organising is the concept of information equivocality, “or the level of understanding of messages to which organisation members respond to” (p.23). In a crisis, the decision makers need to make sense of what is happening by aiming to reduce equivocality and gaining common perspectives. The primary objective is to develop decisions necessary to effectively respond to the changes that are rapidly taking place during crisis onset. Researchers (such as Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007;

Kreps, 2008; Heath & Coombs, 2006) believe that the effective communication of the choices or decisions made about a crisis to the stakeholders is a key element in the success of an organisation's overall crisis management. We concur with this viewpoint and our current study aims to critically investigate how the sensemaking principles of Weick (1995a) weave through the decision making activities of an organisation in communicating the crises and their implications to organisational stakeholders. We also aim to understand why certain decisions may be delayed or postponed in terms of communicating them to the stakeholders, or why choices in decision making can be difficult.

Weick (1995a) explains that in examining decision making, one can choose to either view it as the *process*, or assess its *outcomes* instead. Here, in our study, we intend to anchor our analysis in the investigation of the process of how decisions are made during organisational crises, and why. The aim of the study is to understand the context of decision making of executive teams and communication managers immediately after the crisis occurs. Similarly, decision processes as to whom, how, and when to communicate these messages will also be integrated in our discussion of the research findings. Through a critical analysis of crisis decision making among various organisations, we aim to identify the most effective decision making practices and to be aware of the decisions adversely affecting organisational functioning. As well as contributing to the literature on organisational crisis decision making, this study may provide helpful insights to decision makers who are responsible for crisis management.

This paper summarises key literature central to the study, identifies some of the research gaps in the field, and explores the theoretical underpinnings of our research topic. As an ongoing project, we will begin to discuss some of the initial findings from the existing data we have gathered from the field.

Defining Crisis

There are many well-documented ways of describing "crisis". For example, a crisis can be defined as a situation that is "low-probability, high-impact" (Pearson & Clair, 1998; p.66), and "specific, unexpected, and non-routine... that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten, or are perceived to threaten, [the] organisation's high

priority goals (Ulmer, et al., 2007; p.7).” Krackhardt & Stern (1988) define crisis as a “situation facing an organisation which requires that the organisation, under time constraints, engage in few, untested, unlearned behaviours in order to obtain or maintain its desired goals (p.125).” This definition, however, does not reflect the need for proactive crisis planning integral to much of the more contemporary public relations literature. Nor does it reflect the increasing role of public relations crisis management (Guth & Marsh, 2006; Swann, 2008; Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2007) that prepares organisations for crisis intervention so that behaviours and responses to a crisis are tested and practiced even though crises will always contain elements of surprise and challenge.

To Krackhardt & Stern (1988), a primary distinction between a “problem” and a “crisis” is the pressure of time involved. When uncertain action is required without the pressure of time, the organisation is addressing a problem. It is not a crisis yet. It becomes a crisis “when [it evolves as a] jolt that infuses organizations with energy, [when it] legitimizes unorthodox acts, [and when it] destabilizes power structures (Meyer 1982 in Krackhardt & Stern, 1998, p.125).”

Another way of describing crises is from the perspective of “issues development” (Heath 1997). There are studies that discuss the implications on crisis management depending on whether the decision makers recognise the crises as sudden *or* smouldering events (Penrose, 2000; Heath, 1997; Mitroff, Pearson & Harrigan, 1996; Ford & Baucus, 1987; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Coombs, 1998; Sheaffer & Mano-Negrin, 2003). For instance, the 2007 report¹ of the Institute of Crisis Management based in the US shows that 65 percent of recent corporate crises are caused by “smouldering” issues, and the rest (35 percent) as sudden occurrences. The issues management crisis cycle (Guth & Marsh, 2006) is one that is poised between the management of an issue and the threat of poor management, resulting in a crisis. It becomes important for organisations then to note the difference between issues and crisis management (Heath, 1997) in order for them to (1) manage the issue where possible to prevent such from escalating into a crisis, (2) identify crisis scenarios

¹ Institute of Crisis Management official website at: <http://www.crisisexperts.com/2007CR.pdf> (retrieved on 12 April 2008)

which may be helpful in managing the crisis should it occur, and (3) mitigate the crisis upon its onset.

Swann (2008) contends that worst case scenarios should be planned for and considered for effective crisis decision making and crisis preparedness. On a similar note, Billings, Milburn & Schaalman, (1980) challenge Hermann's (1963) notion that crises come as "surprises" to the organisation. According to the former, crises are anticipated, and that crisis planning makes the organisation less crisis-vulnerable. To them, planning entails "emotional inoculation" or emotional coping mechanisms come the time crises occur. Similarly, the idea of crisis anticipation is supported by Mackey's (2004) presupposition that organisations should foresee crises in order to responsibly and strategically act on them, if and when they happen. Nonetheless, Heath & Coombs (2006) argue that this will only be made possible by adopting a team and collaborative decision making approach. The principles for crisis management are the same for those anticipated or unanticipated. But, the dynamics among decision makers could be different in dealing with crises that develop gradually or those that occur unexpectedly.

Notwithstanding the debate on crises as aftermaths of either sudden events or smouldering issues, Weick (cited in Smith & Elliot, 2006) highlights that crises are "cosmology episodes" wherein the "rational, natural, and orderly fashion of how environments work are disrupted" (p.264). Thus, crises create periods of *uncertainty* (what is going on?) and *ambiguity* (are the crises interpreted differently by those internal and external to the organisations?) which lead to a momentary "collapse" or breakdown of how the organisations "make sense" of what to do next (Weick, 1995a). Weick (Kreps, 2008) however suggests that moments of uncertainty are also key points for public relations intervention, pointing to the importance of understanding the role of public relations in the decision making process. With public relations taking an active role in crisis management, this role is important to the crisis team as it develops decisions by interpreting the crisis vis-à-vis their [and the organisation's] past experiences. This is a stage which Weick (1995a, 1995b; Kreps, 2008) regards as the "enactment" principle of sensemaking. This act of interpretation in turn affects the organisation's response to the crisis (Kreps, 2008).

Crisis research important to the Australian study

Reviewing and considering previous crisis management studies, it is evident that this field of interest has been sporadically researched and has limited scholarly engagement. There is a popular concentration of studies that may be clustered within certain aspects (e.g. case studies on crisis response strategies, attempts to provide conceptual framework in understanding crisis management, organisational perceptions on crisis). Yet, due to its relatively 'young' age as a line of inquiry, there is more work to be done in terms of deconstructing the various elements that can be explored under these popular themes in organisational crisis management.

One of the least explored areas of crisis management are the actual decision making episodes taking place after the occurrence of crises, but before crisis response strategies are implemented or communicated. The notion of decision making, albeit central in organisational crisis management, is rarely explicitly focused on in public relations texts in ways which provide in-depth discussion on how the entire process ensues in the organisation during crises.

For instance, the themes tackled by earlier crisis studies emphasise more on the *outcomes* of decision making and less on the *process* involved in creating such outcomes. Earlier studies on this topic can be found to be clustered within specific themes, such as: 1) crisis typologies and clusters, 2) pre-crisis stakeholder relationships as influential factors in managing organisational crises, 3) organisational perception of crises, 4) cross-disciplinary or integrated approaches of and frameworks for crisis management, 5) successful and failed outcomes of organisational crisis management, 6) crisis response strategies (on image restoration or perception, impression management, and crisis mitigation) across different case studies and typologies, 7) significance of crisis management plans (CMPs) in organisations, and 8) organisational legitimacy after crisis experiences. The decision making angle in these studies is mostly integrated throughout the discussion of the authors, often without a separate discussion on decision making itself. The studies cited in the section following are examples of earlier studies on decision making, in particular those written by organisational communication scholars who focused on the decision making dimension of organisational crises.

On decision making in organisational crises

Fisher (1970, cited in Daniels, Spiker & Papa, 1997) proposes that the four stages of decision making (i.e., orientation, conflict, emergence, reinforcement) chronologically map out the process of how decisions are made in organisations. However, according to Poole (1983a, 1983b), these stages are not always evident in all group decision making due to the many complicated factors that may be unique to one decision making group compared with the others. In other words, Poole is saying that “groups in different situations act in different ways” (cited in Daniels, et al., 1997; p.146). This is his notion of “contingency-based leadership.”

This compares with Poole’s (1983a, 1983b) position that different decision groups may act differently from the other groups due to contingent factors. There are, of course, serious debates among theorists on decision making who believe that the most fitting organisational decision making models either fall within ‘rational’ or ‘non-rational’ realms. According to Conrad & Poole (2005), the rational-actor model views the decision makers as persons who expect to come up with the “best” possible solutions to problems (or crises) prior to implementing an action. Meanwhile, the non-rationalists (e.g. Weick, 1993b; Conrad & Poole, 2005) argue that “[decision makers] cannot be rational actors because they have limited analytical skills” (Conrad & Poole, 2005; p.292) and that “there is not enough time to gather or fully process the relevant information” (p.293) all the time. Metaphorically speaking, the non-rationalists believe that in decision making, it is not about necessarily finding the sharpest “needle” to be used when a merely sharp one can already suffice (Conrad & Poole, 2005). Also, non-rationalists recognise the influence of “intuition” (Conrad & Poole, 2005) or “hunches” in decision making. To them, especially in moments of high organisation stress and uncertainty, intuition or quick decisions often generate effective solutions and may be the best form of decision making possible at those times. Weick’s (1993b) concept of “retrospective sensemaking” supports the non-rationalists’ view as it explains that, at some point, the organisation should start implementing an action (enactment). Then the rationalisation on the soundness or legitimacy of the action is done once it has been made (retrospective). However, Coombs (1998) points to the need to also consider the organisational context and the experience of previous crisis managers in making decisions. He believes that an

intuitive response to crisis may be limited and does not support the need for strategic management critical to effective crisis management (Wigley, 2003).

Regardless of the immediacy of when decisions are made, Coombs (2007) posits that “analytic” processes in decision making are common among decision makers as decisions entail the “identification and evaluation of options” (p.70), in line with organisational goals. From a crisis standpoint where an organisation is at odds with time, strain and pressure (Billings et al., 1980), the latter adds another layer to the complications in the sensemaking of organisations. Crisis decision making can be very difficult. For instance, as a case in point, the interplay of these factors was evident during the Firestone recall crisis in 2000. In this case, apart from the threat posed to the public by the use of the tyres and to the reputation of the organisation itself, the intricate decisions made were based on the financial obligations of Firestone to its loop of stakeholders (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002). Blaney et al., (2002) examined the appropriateness of the image restoration strategies² implemented by Firestone at a time when they were attempting to make sense of how to manage the crisis. In cases such as Firestone’s, sensemaking (Weick, 1995a) provides opportunities for decision makers to restore the “collapsed” structures, internal and external to the organisations, and to minimise the damage to organisations’ reputations (L’Etang, 2008) while managing the crises.

There is also a healthy discourse on centralised versus decentralised decision making in crisis management (Kouzman, Jarman & Rosenthal, 1995; Ford & Baucus, 1987; Hermann, 1963; Krackhardt & Stern, 1988). The findings of the studies in this cluster propose that organisations with fewer subunits involved in actual crisis management tend to more effectively manage crisis than those involving more subunits. Hermann (1963) mentions that in organisational crisis, organisations tend to include fewer personnel in the decision making process. This “contraction of authority” is characterised by smaller decision units when “crucial choices are forced on an organisation from the environment during crisis” (Hermann, 1963; p.70).

² For further studies, see Benoit’s (1995a; 1995b; Blaney et al., 2002; Benoit et al., 2008) works on denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the crisis, corrective action, mortification strategies.

Penrose (2000) further supports these claims when he states that “a higher degree of autonomy in decision making (i.e., limiting the number of filters in the organizational hierarchy) is another reliable predictor of successful crisis management outcomes (p.160).” In addition, Dutton & Jackson (1987) believe that if the organisation has a centralised decision making system, then the cognition of the decision makers will have a greater effect on the organisational actions. Krackhardt & Stern (1988) explain that the centralising tendency of crisis management attempts to “force integrated action” (p.126) by subunits in order to manage the crisis effectively. Thus, more filters would mean more chances for delays. This may result in more negative perceptions of the organisations.

Communication scholars who study organisational decision making during crises underscore the importance of a comprehensive take on this process. Hall’s (1984) process model for managerial decisions indicates the need for the decision makers to engage in a “mapping of the causality” (p. 914) of the crisis faced by the organisation, similar to the cybernetics paradigm studied by Churchman (1971). Hermann (1963) assessed the way the organisations tend to make decisions in “high crisis levels” (p. 72) by considering the degree of authority given to whom in such uncertain times, and the stress levels acquired by those given such authority.

Sheaffer & Mano-Negrin (2003) summarise some of the important intrinsic factors that may affect the decision making episodes of organisations during crisis. These factors are the decision makers’ strategic orientations, such as organisational structures, sizes, and age. Still on this line of inquiry, Comfort (1993) presents four major decision making perspectives that may influence the organisational performance during crises. These are: 1) command and control, 2) organised anarchy, 3) evolutionary learning, and 4) organisational problem solving.

Ethical decision making during crises is another area that has received attention from organisational crisis researchers. Christensen & Kohls (2003) consider decision making as ethical when “all stakeholders have been accorded intrinsic value by the decision maker” (p.332). According to them, this does not entail strict fulfilment of all the claims of a stakeholder. Rather, that each is given proper consideration before decisions are made. Otherwise, “the decision to not satisfy the stakeholder [should] be

justified by the decision makers (p.333).” In this area of inquiry, scholars have proposed that organisations which consider the broadest range of organisational audiences perspectives are “rated in higher legitimacy and ethicality” (Kernisky, 1997; p.851 cited in Christensen & Kohls, 2003; p.333) through “fair and open dialogue with all interested stakeholders toward a goal of genuine consensus” (Bowen & Power, 1993 cited in Christensen & Kohls, 2003; p.333).

On a similar note, Massey (2001) highlights that message consistency, as outcomes of decision making in organisational crisis communication management, is imperative in creating, sustaining, and enhancing the organisation’s legitimacy to continue its operations after the crisis. He believes that the decision makers in the organisations should realise the importance of message consistency across all organisational audiences.

Finally, Ulmer et al. (2007) elaborate on the crisis communication demands faced by decision makers. These are 1) managing the uncertainty, 2) responding to the crisis, 3) resolving the crisis, and 4) learning from the crisis. Ulmer and his co-authors argue that these varying levels of crisis communication demands require varying decision making expectations as well. This means that the different crisis communication demands require different sets of communication strategies/messages.

Summary of the examined literature

Most crisis management studies tackle the decision making aspects in crisis management *through* the crisis response strategies implemented by the organisations. For example, in reading a case analysis on the crisis response strategies of Organisation X, the reader somehow *infers* that the decision makers may have thought it wise to use such strategies. The literature, however, says little about how the decision to use those types of strategies *first came about*. The latter is embedded in the post-crisis analysis usually found in earlier studies.

Studies on organisational crisis decision making have explored many themes. Examples are, (1) centralisation of authority, (2) proactive vs. reactive approaches, 3) rationalist vs. non-rationalist perspectives, 4) cybernetics approach in decision making, 5) critical intrinsic factors in decision making, (6) message consistency in

crisis communication, and 7) ethical concerns involved in decision making in crisis management. The clusters of the studies in these areas of inquiry (i.e., crisis management and decision making) often conclude on a prescriptive or normative tone about how decision making *should* be.

Methodological orientations: Organisational crisis sensemaking

Once a crisis occurs, the starting point of crisis management is to make strategic decisions. For the decision makers, identifying a *special* event as “crisis” speaks differently to managing the crisis itself. Pearson & Clair (1998) explain that organisational crisis management is a systematic attempt initiated by the decision makers of the organisation to “avert the crisis or to effectively manage those that do occur” (p.61).

From a theoretical standpoint, the understanding of this concept may be anchored in the constructivist-interpretive approach in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Weick, 1995a). This paradigm informs our data analysis and interpretation. In broad terms, the constructivist paradigm assumes a ‘relativist ontology’ (existence of multiple realities), a ‘subjectivist epistemology’ (co-creation of understanding by the researcher and the participants), and a ‘naturalistic’ set of methodological (in the natural world) procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; p.21).

We are therefore taking the view that decision making activities in crisis situations in organisations may be dependent on the various ways decision makers perceive or ‘make sense’ of the crises and their impact on the stakeholders (relativist ontology). We then consider that these different views prompt people to socially construct among themselves as to which are the best crisis response strategies to use (subjectivist epistemology). We are aware that various constraints (such as resources) are subsumed under the existing realities imposed by the crisis (naturalistic methodological orientation).

Tackling our data from a critical perspective, this study aims not only to explore the decision making process involved in organisational crises, but also to understand the notion that “reality is a social construction that is created, maintained, altered and destroyed through the process of human interaction (Gordon & Pelligrin, 2008;

p.105). Thus, in studying decision-making, there needs to be an awareness of *who* the decision makers are and the dynamics emanating from such composition of the team which may influence the latter's decision outcomes. Benoit & Pang (2008, p.244) contend that if reality is constructed, decision makers then may be faced with instances when their interpretations of a crisis may lead to decisions which may not be understood by those external to their decision making group.

Weick's (1995b) perspective of organisational sensemaking regards sensemaking "not [as] a metaphor, but [as] the process through which people make sense of their situations" (par. 1). Weick signifies the importance of how individuals, or "agents" as Magala (1997, cited in Craig-Lees, 2001, p. 513) refers to them, choose the type of outcomes or actions demanded from them by certain stimuli. Here, the focus is agent-centred which examines what happens to the changes in the mental frameworks of the individuals themselves *while* processing the stimuli. This occurs mostly from a retrospective angle – and not merely on what the corresponding actions are. These actions emerge as the "interpretation" of the stimuli. Weick proposes that sensemaking is not synonymous to interpretation, since the former talks about the process of arriving at an interpretation, while the latter is the outcome of such process. "It [sensemaking] ...encompasses how the cues were internalised in the first instance and how individuals decide to focus on specific cues" (1995, cited in Craig-Lees, 2001; p.514). Summarising, Weick states that the key distinction is that sensemaking is about the *ways* people *generate* what they interpret. In crisis management, this is affected by the past experiences and history of an organisation as well as the organisational set-up or context. Coombs (2007) suggests that each organisation is governed by its own set of rules, which impacts on the analytical responses to a crisis.

Thus, if the "sense" is the outcome/action of the process/choice of "making sense", if "interpretation" emerges as the outcome/action of the generation of interpretation, and if decisions are the results of the decision making processes involved, in our study, the crisis response and communication strategies become the courses of action materialising from the choices made by the decision makers. Figure 1, following, illustrates this:

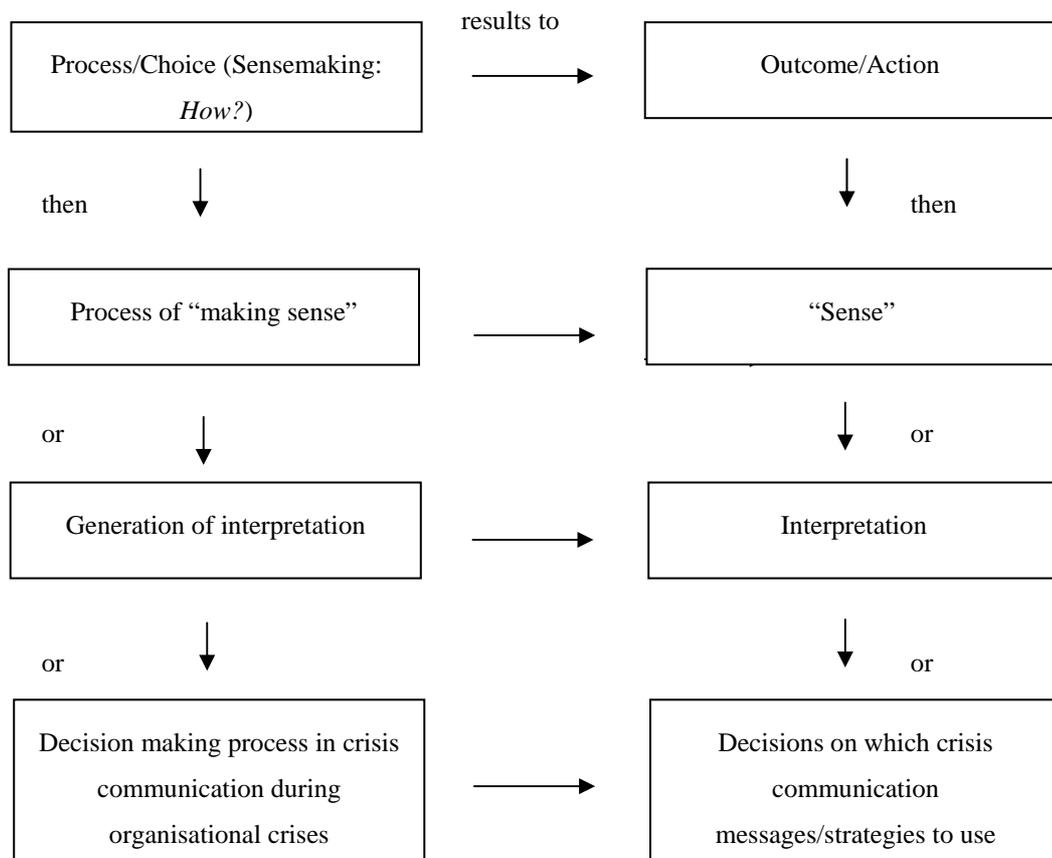


Figure 1. Links of current work in progress

In effect, instead of focusing on the *what* in the decision making activities in organisations during crises, our work in progress intends to provide careful and meaningful sensemaking on the *how* and the *why* (and/or *why not*) such decisions are made. This is an “inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world to help people [organisations] change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (Neumann cited in Smith & Elliot, 2006; p.304). With the decision makers in organisations taking a central role in the study, our critical assessment of the decision making processes may lead us to investigate their personal and professional struggles (that could be due to power, gender, status, interests, roles, norms, among others) permeate through and create decisions on the crises (Daniels, et al., 1997).

In this study, the combination of these theoretical orientations allows one to see how organisations “make sense of equivocal inputs [about a crisis] and enact this sense

back into the world to make that world more orderly” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005; p.410).

Identifying the research gap: Contributing to the link between and among organisational crisis decision making, sensemaking and crisis management

We believe it is of significance to make sense of how decision making in crises is (was) actually done. What is seemingly lacking is an empirical study that will critically examine how decision makers in their past crises experiences developed strategies, mechanisms, and/or messages after the crises occur in their organisations, but before the crisis response strategies/messages were implemented/communicated to the organisational audiences. In other words, we are interested to examine how the decisions are created during the *initial* stages of the crises.

The purpose of our ongoing research is to investigate *how* the decision makers developed their initial crisis communication strategies/messages, rather than focus on *the* outcomes. The success or failure of their crisis communication management, as well as their entire crisis management, may be dependent on how effective/ineffective their initial responses were. Our work in progress aims to examine one step prior to the development of the outcomes. Through Weick’s sensemaking lens, our study will probe into the organisational crisis decision making process which, in turn, produces those crisis responses as decision outcomes. The purpose is to provide a critical analysis of the most effective/ineffective practices in decision making during organisational crises.

A glimpse of preliminary findings from current field notes:

With the completion of 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (each lasting an average of 60 minutes per session), preliminary findings indicate that our objective of being able to understand how crisis decisions are made at the time when the crisis occurs is proving to be an important one. The selection of organisations and participants in the current study was made through the use of purposeful and snowball sampling methods (Charmaz, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Both are sampling techniques in qualitative studies where specific criteria of selection were identified prior to the start of data collection for an initial batch of participants. The rest of the

interviewees were recommendations from the initial batch during the course of fieldwork.

Some of the key points of our initial findings are that:

- We are being pointed to the *who* in organisational crisis decision making instead of the *how* of decision making.
- Most of our interviewees' retrospective accounts of crises mention the roles played by other stakeholders in the organisations' decision making processes, such as those of the police or state emergency centres. It was earlier considered that they would be playing secondary decision making roles but this is not proving to be so. In some cases, interviewees point to the need to talk with the other *agents* or *actors* of a given crisis. Thus, apart from senior management level personnel in organisations and communication managers, our interviews include senior-ranking officers of the South Australian Police as representatives of other decision making agents.
- Public relations practitioners report that they play more of an advisory role to the decision making team rather than being decision makers. Across all interviews in this group, public relations specialists expressed an accepting view about this because their supervisors (if they are an internal division of an organisation) or clients (when they are external) are receptive to their advice and suggestions, which has direct implications on the decisions that are made in the crisis room.
- Most of the crisis managers attributed the first news cycle (ie, first instance that the public hears about the event from the media) as the crucial hours of a crisis. Their past experience has directed their understanding of the critical role of effective decision making during this stage. Albeit inconclusive at this point, we note here the awareness of crisis managers to have on board a public relations/communication specialist at the crisis onset which seems to be related to the early sensemaking of what of is happening in a crisis and the necessary courses of action that should follow.

It has become apparent that through retrospective sensemaking, the participants included in our study often talked about the topic from a general perspective based on

an aggregate of their previous experiences in several crises. During the interviews, they reported many instances through generalised comments, referring to the experience of many crises rather than the crises that were selected as case studies for the purpose of this study. Study reports and initial analysis of findings also indicate that there is a blurring of understanding of decision making from the first stages of crises down to the latter ones. Interviewees, across the 15 interview sessions, seemed to find it quite difficult to compartmentalise the decisions they made throughout the crisis cycle.

This paper's focus on theory is important to crisis decision making in terms of identifying the significance of knowing more about the initial crisis decision making activities when crises occur. The current qualitative study on decision making in the early stages of crises has begun to reveal the different actors important to the act of decision making. Understanding these respective agents' role in decision making is not always apparent.

Conclusion

As this paper is discussing a work in progress, it is important to present the arguments critical to the need for qualitative research on decision making in crisis onset. It has become evident from the semi-structured interviews with a wide range of crisis decision making actors that Weick's sensemaking is integral to the understanding of previous crisis management and experience. A retrospective viewpoint and understanding of crisis decision making as a complex and exacting process is imperative, as well as appreciating the role played by public relations practitioners as one of the agents in decision making in the early stages of a crisis cycle.

The Australian research is moving into a detailed analysis of findings, which will prove to be a valuable study providing understanding of and implications on the role of public relations amidst the intricate web of organisational crisis decision making. Weick's sensemaking approach and the principles important to it will underpin a critical interpretative analysis of one part of crisis decision making. It will focus on who is involved and the context of the decisions made during crisis onset. A full report on these findings will be given in future papers. Beginning to grasp the

complexity of initial crisis decision making is a critically relevant area of crisis research.

References

- Benoit, W. L. (1995a). *Accounts, excuses and apologies*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995b). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W.L. & Pang, A, (2008). Crisis Communication and Image Repair. In T. L. Hansen-Horn & B. Neff, *Public Relations. From Theory to Practice*. (pp. 31-44, 244-259.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Pearson.
- Billings, R., Milburn, T., & Schaalman, M. (1980). A model of crisisperception: A theoretical empirical analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25, 300-316.
- Blaney, J. R., Benoit, W. L., & Brazeal, L. M. (2002). *Public Relations Review*, 28, 379-392.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In D. K. Norman, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 519). California, USA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Christensen, S. L., & Kohls, J. (2003). Ethical decision making in times of organizational crisis: A framework for analysis. *Business & Society*, 42(3), 328-358.
- Churchman, C. W. (1971). *The design of inquiring systems*. New York: Basic Books.
- Comfort, L. K. (1993). Integrating information technology into international crisis management and policy. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 8(2), 203-208.
- Conrad, C., & Poole, M. S. (2005). *Strategic organizational communication* (6th ed.). (pp. 292-293.) USA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007), *Ongoing Crisis Communication. Planning, Managing, and Responding*, 2nd edition (p.70.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Coombs, W. T. (1998). An analytic framework for crisis situations: Better responses from a better understanding of the situation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 10, 171-191.
- Craig-Lees, M. (2001). Sense making: Trojan horse? Pandora's box? *Psychology & Marketing*, 18(5), 513-526.

- Daniels, T. D., Spiker, B. K., & Papa, M. J. (1997). *Perspectives on organizational communication* (Fourth Edition ed.). USA: Brown & Benchmark.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (Second Edition ed.) (p.21.). California, USA: Sage Publications.
- Dutton, J. E., & Jackson, S. E. (1987). Categorizing strategic issues: Links to organizational action. *Academy of Management Review*, 12(1), 76-90.
- Ford, J. D., & Baucus, D. A. (1987). Organizational adaptation to performance downturns: An interpretation-based perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 12(2), 366-380.
- Gordon, J. & Pelligrin, P. (2008). Social Constructionism and Public Relations. In T. L. Hansen-Horn & B. Neff, *Public Relations. From Theory to Practice*, (pp.31-44, pp.104-119). Pearson, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Guth, D. & Marsh, C. (2006). *Public Relations. A values-driven approach*. USA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Hall, R. I. (1984). The natural logic of management policy making: Its implications for the survival of an organization. *Management Science*, 30, 905-927.
- Heath, R. L. (1997). *Strategic issues management: organizations and public policy challenges*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Heath, R. L. & Coombs, W. T. (2006). *Today's public relations: an introduction*. (p.390.) Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Hermann, C. (1963). Some consequences of crisis which limits the viability of organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 8, 61-82.
- Kouzes, A., Jarman, A. M. G., & Rosenthal, U. (1995). Inter-organizational policy processes in disaster management. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 4(2), 20-37.
- Krackhardt, D., & Stern, R. (1988). Informal networks and organizational crises: An experimental simulation. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 51(2), 123-140.
- Kreps, G. (2008). A Weickian Approach to Public Relations and Crisis Management. In T. L. Hansen-Horn & B. Neff, *Public Relations. From Theory to Practice*. (pp.20-44). Pearson, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- L'Etang, J. (2008). *Public Relations, Concepts, Practice and Critique*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Mackey, S. (2004). Public relations theory. In J. Johnston & C. Zawawi, *Public*

- Relations, Theory and Practice*, 1st edition (pp.41-63). NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin,
- Massey, J. E. (2001). Managing organizational legitimacy: Communication strategies for organizations in crisis. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 38(2), 153-183.
- Mitroff, I. I., Pearson, C. M., & Harrigan, L. K. (1996). *The essential guide to managing corporate crises*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Newsom, D., Turk, J. & Kruckeberg, D. (2007). This is PR: the realities of public relations. Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth.
- Pearson, C. M., & Clair, J. A. (1998). Reframing crisis management. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(1), 59-76.
- Penrose, J. M. (2000). The role of perception in crisis planning. *Public Relations Review*, 26(2), 155-171.
- Poole, M. S. (1983a). Decision development in small groups II: A study of multiple sequences in decision making. *Communication Monographs*, 50, 206-232.
- Poole, M. S. (1983b). Decision development in small groups III: A multiple sequence model of group decision development. *Communication Monographs*, 50, 321-341.
- Shapira, Z. (Ed.). (1997). *Organizational decision making*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sheaffer, Z., & Mano-Negrin, R. (2003). Executives' orientation as indicators of crisis management policies and practices. *Journal of Management Studies*, 7, 23-42.
- Smith, D., & Elliot, D. (Eds.). (2006). *Key readings in crisis management: Systems and structures for prevention and recovery* (First Edition ed.). (pp. 264, 304.) London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Swann, p.(2008). *Cases in Public Relations Management*. NY, USA: McGraw Hill.
- Ulmer, R.R., Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T.L. (2007). Post-crisis communication and renewal: Expanding the parameters of post-crisis discourse. *Public Relations Review*, 33(2), 7, 130-134.
- Weick, K. E. (1993a). The vulnerable system: An analysis of the Tenerife air disaster. In K. Roberts (Ed.), *New challenges to understanding organizations* (pp.173-198). New York: McMillan.
- Weick, K. E. (1993b). *The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University.

- Weick, K. E. (1995a). *Sensemaking in organizations*. California, USA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Weick, K. (1995b). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Unpublished manuscript. Retrieved 7 July 2006, from <http://amadeus.management.mcgill.ca/~mark.mortensen/orgweb/summaries/mse/cont>
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.
- Wigley, S. (2003). Relationship Maintenance in a Time of Crisis: The 2001 Oklahoma State University Plane Crash, *Public Relations Quarterly*. Vol.48. (2), pp 42-49.

Copyright Statement: Articles submitted for ANZCA08 remain the copyright of the author, but authors by virtue of submission agree to grant the Department of Communication, Journalism & Marketing at Massey University a copyright license to permanently display the article online for public viewing as part of this conference proceedings, and to grant the National Library of Australia a copyright licence to include the ANZCA08 Proceedings in the PANDORA Archive for permanent public access and online viewing. Articles first published in this ANZCA08 proceedings may subsequently be published elsewhere by authors, provided the next version acknowledges this original publication in the ANZCA08 refereed proceedings.