Attribution Theory as a guide for post-crisis communication research

W. Timothy Coombs*

Communication Studies, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Avenue, Charleston, IL 61920, USA

Received 1 November 2006; received in revised form 1 November 2006; accepted 20 November 2006

Abstract

The field of crisis communication is poised to take the next in its evolution. Now is the time to move beyond the limits of the case study methods that shape the field’s development and shift to empirical methods. As the field matures, crisis managers need recommendations that are based on scientifically tested evidence rather than speculation. The argument for scientifically tested evidence for action is based on the evidence-based in management and medicine. This article discusses the role Attribution Theory has played and can continue to play in building scientifically tested evidence for crisis managers as well as providing an integrative mechanism for the diverse crisis research that spans a variety of disciplines.

Keywords: Crisis communication; Attribution Theory; Crisis

Post-crisis communication, what management says and does after a crisis, is a robust area of research in communication and management. While prolific, the post-crisis communication research is often disjointed and atheoretical. Much of the extant writings consist of lists of what “to do” and what “not to do” drawn from case studies. Moreover, the case studies tend to be based on mediated accounts of the crisis and do not involve interviews with those involved in the crisis. What is underrepresented are theory-based studies designed to systematically identify and model the key variables in post-crisis communication. We “know” little about how people react to crises or crisis responses given the lack of experimental study of the phenomenon (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Dean, 2004; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). What we need in crisis communication is a shift towards evidence-based management, the use of scientific evidence to guide managerial decision-making (Rousseau, 2005).

In communication-based crisis research, we have an over abundance of rhetorical studies that attempt to use descriptive data to claim issues of causality and theory building. There are also problems in preoccupations with finding “genres” in crisis communication that contribute little to theory development and testing. Apologia was a gateway for many into crisis communication. It was useful to think of organizations using communication to protect their public personas/reputations and provided a wealth of resources for developing crisis response strategies (Hearit, 2006). But that does not mean the genre should be the focal point of crisis communication. Some researchers seem bent on finding a new genre in every new crisis. Every crisis does have unique features. However, is it right to have a genre of one? Is not genre to be based on a pattern emerging from a number of works? Furthermore, of what value is discovering

* Tel.: +1 217 581 3324.
E-mail address: wtcoombs@eiu.edu.

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doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.016
another genre of crisis communication? While a valuable start for crisis communication, we seemed to have exhausted the yields from apologia. Post-crisis communication research can offer greater value to theory and practitioners if there is a grander picture that can unite and integrate the various “genres” into usable applied knowledge.

Rhetorical cases’ studies provided the roots for the study of crisis communication in the communication field. It awakened us to the need to focus on what organizations say and do as well keyed us to the value of the situation in influencing crisis responses. However, the time has come to embrace the evolution of the field and influx of empirical studies of crisis communication (e.g., Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Dean, 2004; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005). Crisis communication research should adopt the perspective of evidence-based management. This piece argues that Attribution Theory provides one useful beacon for this evolutionary track.

1. Attribution Theory as a guide

Two key traits of crises are that they are unexpected (we might know one might hit but not when) and negative. These are also the key characteristics that Attribution Theory expert Bernard Weiner identified as driving people’s need to search for causes of an event (Weiner, 1985,1986). It is logical to connect crises and Attribution Theory. Stakeholders will make attributions about the cause of a crisis; they will assess crisis responsibility. Was the crisis a result of situational factors or something the organization did? Indeed, extant research forges a link between Attribution Theory and crises (e.g., Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & McDonald, 1998; Jorgensen, 1994,1996; McDonald & Härtel, 2000; Stockmyer, 1996).

The attributions stakeholders make about crisis responsibility have affective and behavioral consequences for an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; McDonald & Härtel, 2000). If the organization is deemed responsible, the reputation will suffer. In turn, stakeholders may exit the relationship and/or create negative word-of-mouth. Management has a vested interest in preventing either of these two negative outcomes.

1.1. Early application of Attribution Theory to crisis

The first true studies of crisis communication appear in the management literature with works appearing in the 1980s. While the study of apologia pre-dates the 1980s, its application to crisis communication did not occur until the later 1980s. Mowen (1980) was among the first to systematically broach the idea of a crisis response. Mowen also initiated an important conceptual link for crisis communication, the use of Attribution Theory. Weiner (1986) built Attribution Theory on the premise that people need to assign responsibility for events. Attribution Theory posits that people look for the causes of events, especially unexpected and negative events. Most experts agree that a crisis is negative and unexpected. When using Attribution Theory, the threat of a crisis is largely a function of crisis responsibility/blame. Managers should evaluate the situation to determine which crisis response is best for the situation (Coombs, 1995, 2004; Mowen, 1980).

Product harm crises were used for the initial development of crisis communication. For product harm crises, four crisis response strategies have served as the focal point of research: denial, forced compliance, voluntary compliance, and super effort. Denial involves the organization claming there is no threat from their product. Voluntary compliance occurs when the government forces a recall or other remediation efforts. Voluntary compliance is when a company recalls or takes remediation efforts on its own accord. Super efforts involve voluntary compliance plus compensation and an extensive communication campaign to promote the effort (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994).

Researchers have documented that crises have negative effects on market share, sales of the recalled product, stock prices, purchase intention, and sales of other products by the company (taint-the-line) (Dawar, 1998; Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). The crisis response can reduce or eliminate these negative effects. It is important to note that management researchers look beyond reputation (character) to include other variables. Again, this is not just apologia. The management recognition of various outcomes more accurately reflects the demands faced by crisis managers. They are not just wrestling with reputational concerns but with legal and financial ones as well.

Bradford and Garrett (1995) applied Attribution Theory to ethical crises, a departure from the product harm line of research. Bradford and Garrett developed a model, based in Attribution Theory, which was designed to explain what crisis response to select based upon the nature of the ethical crisis. We find Attribution Theory has now been applied to a variety of crisis types. However, the research is made comparable by the theoretical linkage. The research shares similar theoretical and methodological assumptions.
1.2. Situational crisis communication theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) applies Attribution Theory based ideas to a wider array of crises. SCCT draws upon experimental methods and social–psychological theory. This is true to the Attribution Theory roots of SCCT. SCCT advances and test hypotheses related to how perceptions of the crisis situation affect the crisis response and the effects of crisis responses on outcomes such as reputation, emotions, and purchase intention. SCCT research extends and is comparable to the early product harm and ethical crises research found in the management and marketing literatures.

SCCT begins with the crisis manager examining the crisis situation in order to assess the level of the reputational threat of a crisis. The threat is the amount of damage a crisis could inflict on the organization’s reputation if no action is taken. Three factors in the crisis situation shape the reputational threat: (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history, and (3) relationship history/prior reputation. Crisis managers follow a two-step process for using these three factors to assess the reputational threat.

The first step in assessing the reputational threat is to determine the initial crisis responsibility attached to a crisis. Initial crisis responsibility is a function of stakeholder attributions of personal control for the crisis by the organization – how much stakeholders believe organizational actions caused the crisis (Coombs, 1995). Research has consistently demonstrated that increased attributions of crisis responsibility produce lower reputational scores – is a greater reputational threat (Coombs & Holladay, 1996,2002,2004). The initial assessment is based upon the crisis type. The crisis type is how the crisis is being framed. Frames are cues that stakeholders use to interpret crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Dowling, 2002). A crisis type is a frame that indicates how people should interpret the crisis events. What is the event an accident, sabotage, or criminal negligence?

SCCT posits that each crisis type generates specific and predictable levels of crisis responsibility—attributions of organizational responsibility for the crisis. SCCT research has identified three crisis clusters based upon attributions of crisis responsibility by crisis type: (1) victim cluster has very weak attributions of crisis responsibility (natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering, and rumor) and the organization is viewed as a victim of the event; (2) accidental cluster has minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (technical-error accident, technical-error product harm, and challenge) and the event was considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization; and (3) intentional cluster has very strong attributions of crisis responsibility (human-error accident, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeed) and the event was considered to be purposeful (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

By identifying the crisis type, the crisis manager can determine how much crisis responsibility stakeholders will attribute to the organization at the onset of the crisis. In turn, crisis responsibility indicates the initial reputational threat because crisis responsibility has been proven to be negatively related to organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996,2001). The second step in assessing the threat involves two intensifying factors, consistency and distinctiveness, derived from Kelley’s principle of covariance (Kelley, 1972; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Martinko, Douglas, Ford & Gundlach, 2004). Consistency is operationalized as crisis history; whether or not an organization has had a similar crisis in the past. Consistency is high if an organization previously has had similar events. A history of crises suggests an organization has an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed. The organization is consistently having problems.

Distinctiveness is operationalized as relationship history/prior reputation; how well or poorly an organization has treated stakeholders in other contexts. Distinctiveness is low if the organization has a history of treating stakeholders badly. An organization shows little consideration for stakeholders across a number of domains, not just in this crisis. The crisis is not distinctive. Either high consistency or low distinctiveness increases the threat from a crisis. Each indicates that the crisis is part of a pattern of behaviors rather than an isolated incident (Coombs, 2004).

Distinctiveness (relationship history/prior reputation) and consistency (crisis history) have both a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis. Either low distinctiveness or high consistency will intensify attributions of crisis responsibility thereby indirectly affecting the reputational threat. Moreover, the two factors have a direct effect on the reputational threat that is separate from crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2004). Crisis history (consistency) and relationship history/prior reputation (distinctiveness) are used to adjust the initial assessment of the threat. SCCT posits that either a crisis history or a negative relationship history/prior reputation will intensify the reputational threat. Applied to crisis management, a victim crisis becomes treated as an accident crisis and an accident crisis becomes treated as an intentional crisis when either consistency is high (crisis history) or distinctiveness is low (negative relationship history) (Coombs & Holladay, 2001,2004).
The crisis response strategies vary in their perceived acceptance of responsibility for the crisis. SCCT’s general tenant is that as the reputational threat and negative affect increases, crisis managers should utilize crisis response strategies with the requisite level of accepting crisis responsibility. Put another way, crisis managers need to accept greater levels of responsibility as the reputational threat intensifies. SCCT has been applied beyond reputation. The factors shaping the reputational threat also serve to shape the affect generated by crisis and purchase intentions (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Refer to Coombs (2006) for a fuller discussion of SCCT recommendations for post-crisis communication.

2. Integrative nature of Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory provides a common set of concepts and shared methods that allow for easier integration of research findings from different researchers. Kelly’s covariation principle is an example. Kelley’s work is built on the concepts of consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Studies that share the use of covariation can be compared. The research will share experimental methods and how the variables should relate to one another. Exact operationalization of variables might differ but the consistent conceptualization of concepts results in similar operationalizations. The shared concepts and methods made it possible to integrate a number of diverse product harm crisis studies into one larger set of recommendations for crisis managers (Laufer & Coombs, 2006).

The idea for evidence-based management is derived from evidence-based medicine. The focus is on using scientifically proven results to guide actions in medicine and now management (Rousseau, 2005). This piece argues that we should extend the ideas to create evidence-based crisis communication and move away from the speculation offered by cases built from mediated reports of crises. Attribution Theory provides a mechanism for integrating the various studies of crisis communication to build a set of principles for evidence-based crisis communication.

3. Summary

Post-crisis communication research should continue along its newer, empirical track. Such research is providing tested results to crisis managers rather than speculation based on case studies. We move away from decisions based on unsystematic data toward evidence-based decisions. Attribution Theory is an historical and still viable theory for integrating crisis communication research. A common theoretical link allows for the integration of research from various researchers in diverse fields. We begin to build upon one another’s work and see how the pieces can begin to be integrated into a larger whole. Moreover, there is a broad research agenda to pursue based upon Attribution Theory. A partial list would include application of fundamental attribution error to crises and implications for crisis communication, the ability of crisis response strategies to shape perceptions of the crisis frames, how crisis response strategies can trigger the discounting principle, and relationship of crisis frames to counter-factual thinking. With Attribution Theory as a connecting point, diverse streams of research can converge into a river of post-crisis communication knowledge that provides a mechanism for evidence-based crisis communication.

References


