The influence of accountability for the crisis and type of crisis communication on people's behavior, feelings and relationship with the government

Marije H. Bakker[a,*], Marco van Bommel[a], José H. Kerstholt[a,b], Ellen Giebels[a]

[a] *University of Twente, Department of Psychology of Conflict, Risk and Safety, PO BOX 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands*
[b] *TNO, PO BOX 23, 3769 ZG Soesterberg, The Netherlands*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigated to what extent the willingness of people to take advice from the local government, people's feelings of collective efficacy and empowerment, and their relationship with the local government, is dependent on whether the local government was accountable for the crisis or not. In addition, we were interested in the influence of empathic versus neutral crisis information on people's behavior, feelings and their relationship with the local government. The results indicate that people's intention to follow the advice of the local government is generally high, even when the local government is held accountable for the crisis. However, accountability negatively influenced people's relationship with the local government, as well as collective efficacy. Our research shows that this negative outcome for people's relationship with the local government cannot be countered by empathic crisis information. However, conveying empathic concern in the crisis information did enhance level of collective efficacy.

1. Introduction

People live in a society that is affected by a broad range of crisis situations, such as floods, industrial fires and terrorist attacks. Regardless of where one lives, many different types of crisis have the potential to disrupt people's daily life (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2013). There are two prominent factors that influence people's reactions during a crisis, namely who or what is held accountable for the crisis, and the type of information people receive about the crisis (e.g., Coombs, 2004; Steelman, McCaffrey, Velez, & Briefel, 2015).

Accountability can broadly be attributed to internal or external factors. When the cause of the crisis is attributed to internal factors, a person or organization is held accountable for the cause of the crisis. Attributions to external factors include situations with a low accountability attribution to a person or organization, such as a crisis caused by technical errors (e.g., Coombs, 2007). These categories are important as research shows that attributions about who or what is accountable for a crisis shape feelings and behaviors (Coombs, 2004; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Lee, 2004). Moreover, it may change the relationship between people and the organization that is held accountable for the crisis. The organization, for instance, may seem as less trustworthy or less competent (e.g., Becker, Paton, & Johnston, 2015; Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011). There is a leading theory that investigates relational maintenance strategies (e.g., Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), but the key driving theory in this study is the attribution theory, because attributions underlie how a relationship is perceived.

How people respond to a crisis, however, depends not only on who is held accountable for the crisis, but it is also influenced by the information people receive. Typically, crisis information contains facts about the situation and advises on how to deal it (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013). However, Sutton, Palen, and Shklovski (2008) reasoned that crises also create a need for empathy. Expressing empathy during crisis is important as it demonstrates recognition of and concern for the people that are suffering (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010), which may lead to a better relationship between people, and the organization and a stronger influence of crisis information on people's behavior (Seeger, 2006).

The current research aims to investigate to what extent people's behavior, feelings of collective efficacy and empowerment, and their relationship with the organization is influenced by accountability for the crisis and the type of crisis communication. We focus on the local government as organization, as the local government usually sends crisis information, and they are primary accountable for public security in the Netherlands. Up to now, research mostly investigated the effect of accountability for a crisis when the organization was a commercial company (the private sector) (Coombs, 2004, 2007). However, it is worthwhile to also examine what the effect of accountability for a crisis is when the organization is the local government (the public sector), because in times of crisis the (local) government is usually accountable for communicating proper and trustworthy crisis communication. Once trust is lowered due to accountability, it is possible that people will also have less trust in this information. Empathic crisis communication may restore the relationship between people and the local government. In an experimental study involving a fictitious large-scale fire with hazardous substances, we manipulated whether the local government was accountable for the crisis or not and whether the crisis communication was framed as neutral or empathic.

1.1. Crisis accountability

Who or what is held accountable for a crisis may influence how people respond to the crisis and how they view the actors involved in the situation. The rationale for this notion lies in attribution theory, which holds that people make judgments about the causes of a situation, especially when the situation is unexpected and has negative outcomes, such as crisis situations. People will attribute the cause of an event either to an individual or organization involved in the event or to external circumstances. Attributions indicate whether someone believes that the cause of the crisis is within the control of people or an organization involved (Coombs, 2004, 2007). If people believe, for instance, that an organization could control a crisis, they will also hold the organization responsible for the crisis (Lee, 2004).

Causal attributions are important because they affect emotions generated by the event and future interactions with the person or organization involved (Coombs, 2004, 2007). Lee (2004), for example, found that when an organization is responsible for a crisis, people are more likely to form negative impressions of the organization, tend to be less sympathetic toward the organization and have less trust in the organization. In addition, McDonald, Sparks, and Glendon (2010) describe an association between crisis responsibility and negative feelings, and behavioral intentions.

1.2. Framing crisis communication

People's behavior and attitude in response to a crisis is not only influenced by crisis accountability, but also by the information they receive during a crisis. During a crisis, the local government provides crisis information to enable people to adequately deal with the crisis (e.g., Lindell & Perry, 2012; Stubbé, Emmerik, & Kerstholt, 2017). Telling people about the crisis situation and what they can do to reduce their harm can help restore some sense of control over an uncertain and threatening situation (Seeger, 2006). More recently, however, researchers suggested that crises not only create a need for information, but also for human conversation (Sutton et al., 2008).

A way to introduce "a human voice" in crisis communication is by expressing empathy. Although the definition of empathy has been much discussed, most researchers view empathy as having both cognitive and affective elements (e.g., Davis et al., 2004; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Cognitive empathy refers to perspective taking, the cognitive capacity to consider the world from another individual's viewpoint. Affective empathy refers to empathic concern, the ability to understand and share emotions with someone else. It is also often labeled as expressing sympathy or compassion (Shen, 2010).

There has been sporadic evidence for the persuasive impact of empathy-based information. Most studies on this topic are focused on messages that advocate pro-social behaviors that concern others' well-being, as reflected in the topics they considered (e.g., organ donation, Bae (2008)). Less is known about the persuasive effect of empathy when the message is relevant to one's own well-being (Shen, 2010). There is, however, some evidence that indicates that including empathy in a message has several positive consequences. Firstly, Shen (2010) suggested that when information induces empathy, this leads to more similarity and a better relationship between the sender and receiver of the information. Additionally, a good relationship increases the persuasiveness of the information for behavior (Faraji-Rad, Samuelsen, & Warlop, 2015; Silvia, 2005; Steelman et al., 2015). Secondly, when a person receives empathy expressing information this may reduce negative affective responses, such as anger (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Shen, 2010). Thirdly, expressing empathy may also lead to higher levels of trust in the sender and people may respond more positively (i.e., people have more faith that the recommended actions are appropriate and legitimate) to spokespersons who acknowledge their concerns and show compassion for any harm that may have occurred (De Waal, 2008; Seeger, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007).

1.3. Stimulating resilient communities

The relationship between citizens and professionals in crisis management is becoming more and more important, as a result of