Perceptions of crisis preparedness and motivation: A study among municipal leaders

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ABSTRACT

The need for communities to be prepared for a wide variety of critical events places considerable responsibility on local municipal leaders. However, few studies have examined how these leaders themselves view crisis preparedness issues. The purpose of this study was to examine factors that contribute to three aspects of preparedness among municipal leaders: perceived municipal preparedness, perceived individual preparedness and motivation for preparedness work. Six hypotheses were formulated. The research questions were investigated using data from a questionnaire sent out to all Swedish municipalities (N = 290) and four categories of municipal leaders respectively (N = 1101). The response rate was 67%. Data were analyzed by linear regression and logistic regression. Different factors predicted the three outcome variables, which indicates different mental concepts. The hypotheses were partly supported and the results are discussed using self-efficacy theory. The findings have implications for understanding perceived preparedness and motivation, and can be used to e.g. develop crisis management exercises.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Preparedness is generally emphasized as crucial for the successful management of crisis events (see e.g. Drennan et al., 2014; Lerbinger, 2012). Indeed, there is a wealth of literature highlighting the significance of crisis preparedness activities from practical (Kapucu and Özerdem, 2011; Howitt and Leonard, 2009), moral and legal (Alexander, 2002) perspectives. Nevertheless, the importance of the pre-crisis phase is often overlooked, both in organizations and at the community level (Stern, 2013).

Neglecting preparation in the pre-crisis phase may have particularly serious consequences for communities. The need for community preparedness at the local, regional and national level has become increasingly manifest in recent decades for a number of reasons. First, actual experiences in terms of hurricanes, floods, terrorist attacks, infrastructure breakdowns and other events have demonstrated the broad range of possible disasters that can strike a community. In such critical situations there has been a clear need for effective crisis management in order to deal with the event and to meet the needs of citizens. Second, public expectations of government authorities' capacity to deal with crises have become more explicit; today it is almost taken as a given that people will be safe and secure (Boin et al., 2006; Clarke, 2006; Kapucu and Van Wart, 2006). These expectations may have been accentuated by media reporting and framing which tend to highlight issues of accountability and blame in relation to crises (An and Gower, 2009; Boin et al., 2006; Drennan et al., 2014). A further factor leading to increased awareness of the need for crisis preparedness may be found in reports on negative contingency trends in relation, for example, to urbanisation, economic and social inequality, environmental degradation (GAR, 2015), terrorism and ethnic conflicts (GAR, 2011; Schwartz, 2003). Together with the academic debate on the development of risks in modern society led by researchers such as Beck (2002), these trends all point to a need to prepare for considerable future challenges and uncertainties.

In Sweden, as in many countries, primary responsibility in the event of a disaster or crisis lies at the local level (Sweden has 290 municipalities). A key principle in the Swedish crisis management system is that whoever is responsible for an activity in normal conditions should maintain the same responsibility during a crisis (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency: MSB, n.d.). Swedish municipal leaders are responsible for many activities that are key in the event of a disaster or crisis. This means that they bear responsibility not only during, but also before and after an event. Thus, municipal leaders and officials play a crucial role in developing and maintaining crisis preparedness.

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As part of ensuring that their municipality is prepared, municipal leaders and officials are obliged to make risk and vulnerability assessments and to establish contingency plans. They are also expected to update and report their exercise plans to the responsible authority, MSB (SFS, 2006:544). Municipal leaders may also be members of the crisis management board. It is commonly assumed that all of these activities contribute to better preparedness at both the organizational and individual manager level. A few studies have examined how this kind of work is structured and coordinated at a municipal level (Johansson et al., 2009a, 2009b) but the perspective of the leaders themselves is largely unexplored.

Research in a variety of contexts has indicated the important role of perceptions and experiences among senior managers and leaders in promoting and maintaining crisis preparedness in an organization (Pearson and Clair, 1998; Penrose, 2000; Smith and Kline, 2010). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the perceptions and experiences of municipal leaders play a significant role in determining preparedness at the local level. However, despite the significance of municipal preparedness for societal safety, this aspect has received little research attention.

The aim of this study is to examine how municipal leaders, managers and officials (collectively referred to as municipal leaders), perceive crisis preparedness both within their own organization and at a personal level, and to identify factors that contribute to perceived preparedness and motivation to work with preparedness issues.

To begin with, this article presents previous research on individual and organizational crisis preparedness and on how different experiences such as preparedness activities and actual crisis events affect crisis preparedness. Based on these findings, hypotheses are formulated. In interpreting previous research, self-efficacy theory and collective efficacy theory are applied. The methods used to collect the data for the study, the data sample and the approach adopted in analysing the data are then described. Descriptive data, analyses of associations between variables and an overview of findings related to the research aim are then presented. Finally, the results are discussed and further research is suggested.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This section describes previous research on crisis preparedness activities (planning and exercises) and real crisis experiences. The section concludes with a summary and statement of the research hypotheses examined in the study.

1.2.1. Preparedness activities

There is a broad literature specifying how crisis managers and organizations should act in order to be well prepared. In this literature, plans are emphasized, as they are held to lead to better preparation for various types of events (Lerbinger, 2012). Planning activities, including the formulation of abstract principles and checklists, are seen as the key to successful crisis management (e.g. Alexander, 2005; Perry and Lindell, 2003). However, these kinds of plans have been criticized as too limited and narrow in scope (Fowler et al., 2007; Perry and Lindell, 2003; Somers and Svara, 2009). Planning has even been termed a "mission impossible", as many contingency plans are not based on realistic expectations (Clark, 1999).

Evidence about the process of planning, however, suggests that it creates a sense of security, and as a consequence, provides a better basis for improvisation (Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2003). Furthermore, in a study of school counselors, Werner (2014) found that the more involved the counselors were in planning, the more prepared they felt.

Thus, while the role of planning in contributing to actual crisis preparedness has been questioned, the process of planning does

appear to contribute positively to mental preparedness and motivation to engage in preparedness.

It is also generally assumed in the literature that preparedness can be improved by participation in exercises, thus leading to more effective crisis management (McConnell and Drennan, 2006). Exercises can give a crisis manager/team the opportunity to test their organization, as well as their own ability to handle an event (Lerbinger, 2012; Perry, 2004). Perry (2004) demonstrated that exercises influence participants' perceptions of both the crisis management process and participating actors. Participants reported that they gained a better understanding of other actors' thinking and ways of acting (Perry, 2004). The understanding of other actors is important because, in many crises, the need for collaboration with other organizations and teams is crucial to the outcome. An exercise provides opportunities to observe how well a team functions when handling an event (Shapiro, 1995), and successful exercises increase perceptions among the participating actors that teamwork is possible (Kartez, 1988). Successful collaborative exercises also have positive effects on perceptions of the value of exercises (Berlin and Carlström, 2014).

In addition, while the research highlights different conceptions of the experiences and abilities that crisis managers can actually obtain from exercises, the overall conclusion is that exercises can improve the mental preparedness of managers (Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2003).

1.2.2. Crisis experience

In addition to organized activities such as planning and exercises, actual crisis experience may also impact on crisis management. The literature suggests that such experiences have both positive and negative aspects - especially with respect to perceptions of preparedness and managers' motivation to work on issues related to crisis preparedness.

A general problem highlighted by crisis managers is that risk and security issues tend to have low priority, at least before anything has happened (Hooper, 1999; Somers and Svara, 2009). At the local level, municipal leaders with experience of crises emphasise the importance of having been through a crisis for their understanding of the essential preconditions for crisis management (Enander et al., 2009; Hede, 2011). These leaders also note the significance of experience in raising awareness of the importance of preparedness (Enander et al., 2009), and in highlighting shortcomings in their own preparedness as well as in that of their municipality (Hede, 2011).

Previous research indicates that perceptions of preparedness activities are more positive following experience of a crisis (see, for example, studies of nurses (Baack and Alfred, 2013) and school counselors (Werner, 2014)). More precisely, crisis management experience positively affects perceptions of the value of crisis planning (Smith and Kline, 2010).

Crisis experience has also been shown to increase motivation to undertake preparedness-related activities, both at the organizational and individual level (Boin et al., 2006; Baack and Alfred, 2013; Enander et al., 2009). At the organizational level, criticism from stakeholders in society is a strong motivational factor. This prompts analysis of the lessons that should be learned from an event, and the development or revision of policies relating to crisis situations (Boin et al., 2006). At the individual level, it seems that a crisis increases a manager's motivation to engage with activities related to crisis preparedness (Enander et al., 2015). However, in relation to exercises after a crisis event, result from one study indicate that while some crisis managers and coworkers felt more motivated and emphasized the importance of exercises, others felt less motivated and saw no further contribution from exercises to preparedness (Hede, 2011).