2-2010

# Future directions of crisis communication research: Emotions in crisis – The next frontier

JIN

A. PANG
*Singapore Management University*, augustine@smu.edu.sg

# 33

# Future Directions of Crisis Communication Research: Emotions in Crisis – The Next Frontier

Yan Jin and Augustine Pang

The incinerator at a factory explodes. Workers close by perish. When news breaks, fear creeps in. The factory owners try their best to contain the crisis, but all around them, people are distraught. Top managers are sad, fellow workers are anxious, family members of the deceased are angry, the community is frightened that the explosion may have untold repercussions. The owners do the next best thing they know how: call in crisis consultants to devise the most appropriate strategies to deal with these primary publics. Yet, they cannot quite get through to them. Why? One possible reason is that these strategies do not take into account the emotional upheavals these publics face.

Scholars, though recognizing the need to address emotions and affect in decision making (Pfau & Wan 2006; Wang 2006), have not ventured to do so. Though there have been calls to examine this area (Jin & Cameron 2007), it is only recently that more work is beginning to emerge. For instance, Coombs and Holladay (2005) identified three emotions from attribution theory particularly salient to crisis management: sympathy, anger, and *schadenfreude* (taking joy from the pain of the organization), which highlighted the importance of examining specific emotions rather than global feelings (Garg, Inman, & Mittal 2005), as well as the need to define "affective states beyond their valence when studying their effects on behavior" (Raghunathan, Pham, & Corfman 2006: 600). Recently, Turner (2006) posited the anger activism model in studying the use of emotion in risk communications, using levels of anger and efficacy to predict behavioral differences.

Despite the importance of affect in persuasion and strategic decision making in crisis communication, there remains a lack of a systematic and integrated approach to understanding how publics' emotional experience in crisis influence their crisis information processing and behavioral tendencies, which will eventually determine the success or failure of any organization's crisis communication practice.

Three scholars – Yan Jin, from Virginia Commonwealth University (US), Augustine Pang, from Nanyang Technological University (Singapore), and Glen T. Cameron, from the University of Missouri (US) – have recently developed a

*The Handbook of Crisis Communication* Edited by W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay
 ISBN: 978-1-405-19441-9

systematic way of studying emotions and crisis communication through their integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model to understand the primary publics' crisis responses, as evidenced by the predominant emotion elicited by different types of crises, which explores the interplay of the landmark situational typology and information processing predictions with the appraisal model of emotion (Lazarus 1991). In doing so, they believe that in addition to existing situation-based crisis responses research, an alternative approach should be taken to shape crisis responses from an emotion-based perspective in order to understand what are the emotional upheavals that the publics involved in the crisis are likely to experience so that organizations can streamline their strategies to address publics' specific needs, or at least, interpret those needs to the top decision makers in a meaningful way.

## Integrated Crisis Mapping Model

In this framework, four negative emotions (anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness) are identified as the dominant emotions that are most likely to be experienced by the publics in crisis situations.

### Anger

The core relational theme underlying anger is a demanding offense against "me" and "mine" (Lazarus 1991). In crisis situations, the primary publics tend to experience anger when facing a demanding offense from certain organizations against them or their well-being. The ego-involvement of the public is engaged to preserve or enhance their identity or benefit in the situation.

### Fright

The core relational theme to fright is facing uncertain and existential threat (Lazarus 1991). The public is not certain about how to cope with the loss, as well as how the engaged organization may handle the situation. Depending on their resources and power, they may choose avoidance or escape from the crisis as a viable recourse.

### Anxiety

By definition, anxiety stems from the core relational theme of facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger (Lazarus 1991). The public may feel overwhelmed by the crisis situation and look for the immediate solutions.

### Sadness

An irrevocable loss is the core relational theme of the emotion of sadness (Lazarus 1991). The public suffers from tangible or intangible loss, or both. Their goal of survival is threatened and this loss of any type of ego-involvement (e.g.,

esteem, moral values, ideals, people and their well-being, etc.) caused by uncontrollable sources may leave them with no one to blame and in desperate need for relief and comfort.

Another key concept in the appraisal model of emotion are the different levels of emotions felt at a given time toward a given stimulus. The primary level emotion is the one the public experiences in the first, or immediate, instance. The secondary level emotion is one the public experiences in subsequent instances, as time goes by, and contingent upon the organization's responses to the crisis. The secondary level emotion may be transferred from the dominant emotion or coexist with the primary level.

## Operationalization of the ICM Model

The ICM model is indicated by a crisis matrix based on two axes. On the X-axis is the public's coping strategy. Adapting the cognitive appraisal theory in emotion (Lazarus 1991), there are two types of coping: (1) problem-focused coping – changing the actual relationship between the public and the organization via actual measures and steps, and (2) cognitive-focused coping – changing only the way in which the relationship is interpreted by the public. Therefore, *coping strategy* refers to the dominant choice of the publics in dealing with the crisis situation: either cognitive coping – the public try to sort out a way of thinking or interpreting the meaning of the crisis with regard to their well-being – or conative coping – the public try to manage the situation so as to alter a troubled relationship or to sustain a desirable one by taking actions or at least show a tendency to action. Anchoring these two coping strategies to the axis, different primary publics in different crises may choose a different coping strategy along this continuum. Therefore, this X-axis consists of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as exceeding the resources of the public.

On the Y-axis is the level of organizational engagement, ranging from high to low. Jin et al. (2007a) defined high organizational engagement as intense, consolidated, sustained, and high priority in allocation of resources to deal with the crisis; on the contrary, low organizational engagement does not mean cursory or no engagement, but that the organization devotes comparatively less resources, effort, and energy to deal with the crisis, either because the organization recognizes there is little it can do, or when the organization did not cause the crisis, or is depending on external help, like a regulatory agency, to help it resolve the crisis.

Thus, in this model, there are four quadrants posited:

*Quadrant 1:* The dominant emotions are anger, then anxiety. Publics engage in conative coping and organizations need to engage highly.

*Quadrant 2:* The dominant emotions are sadness, then fright. Publics engage in cognitive coping and organizations need to be highly engaged.

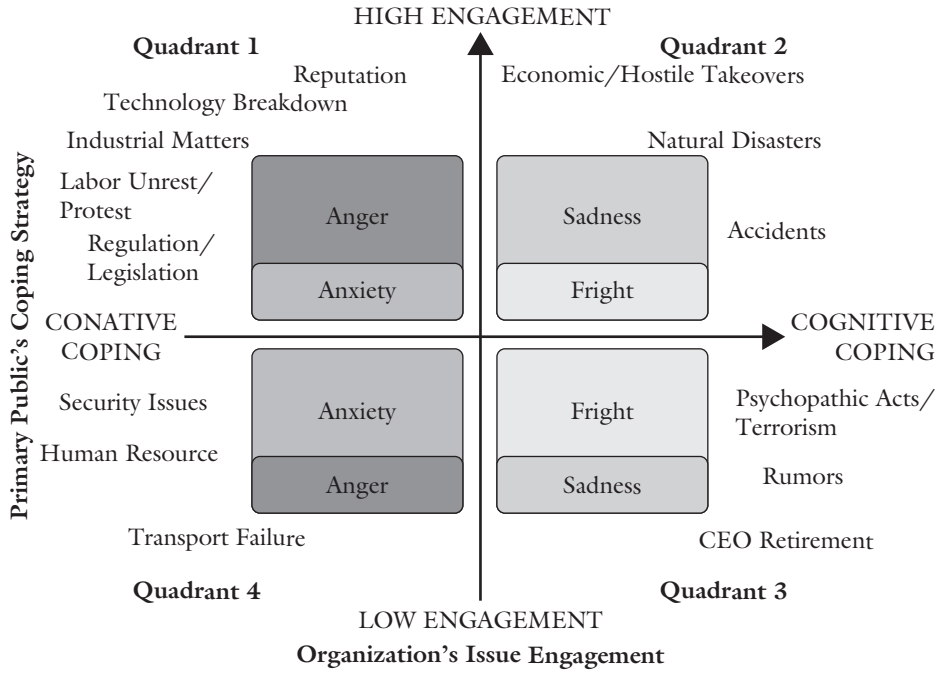


**Figure 33.1** Integrated crisis mapping model (Jin, Pang, & Cameron 2007a, 2007b)

*Quadrant 3:* The dominant emotions are fright, then sadness. Publics engage in cognitive coping and organizations need not engage so highly.

*Quadrant 4:* The dominant emotions are anxiety, then anger. Publics engage in conative coping and organizations need not engage so highly (see figure 33.1).

## What ICM Has Revealed So Far

Empirical tests have provided support for the theoretical rigor of ICM. In the first test to examine the emotions and level of engagement on the first quadrant involving crises pertaining to reputational damage, technological breakdown, industrial matters, labor unrest, and regulation/legislation, findings showed the presence of anger and anxiety, as posited. Additionally, the emotion of sadness was also found to coexist with anger and anxiety. The primary publics were found to engage in conative coping (Jin et al. 2007b). In the second test to examine organizational strategies for the above-mentioned crises in the same quadrant, evidence showed that organizations needed only to engage their primary publics moderately rather than intensely. This "strategic holding position" afforded a situation where organizations were able to assume a qualified rhetoric-mixed stance, utilizing a mixed bag of strategies ranging from defensive strategies like excuse

and justification, to accommodative strategies like ingratiation and corrective action, to engage their publics (Pang et al. 2007). The third test to examine the emotions and levels of engagement on the second and third quadrants of the model found that anxiety could be the default emotion that publics feel in crises. The subsequent emotions felt by the publics in crises involving hostile takeovers, accidents, and natural disasters in the second quadrant were variations of sadness, anger, and fright, while the subsequent emotions felt by the publics involved in CEO retirement, rumor, and psychopathic acts in the third quadrant were fright and anger. As far as coping strategies were concerned, conative rather than cognitive coping was evident (Jin et al. 2008). The fourth test found that on top of discovering anxiety as a possible default emotion that publics feel in crises in an earlier study, the default response organizations tend to adopt when embroiled in crises involving hostile takeovers, accidents, natural disasters, CEO retirement, rumor, and psychopathic acts, are of a qualified rhetoric-mix stance that is full of rhetoric while doing little to reassure the publics. Where possible, organizations should move beyond initial posturing to real action, i.e., from a qualified rhetoric-mix stance to action-based stance, peppered with messages that use what we call "emo-action language," language that acknowledges the emotional upheavals the publics experience, with promises of concurrent action to alleviate their emotional turmoil (Pang et al. 2008).

## Importance of Emotion Research in Crisis: Discovering the Map to Publics' Hearts

As Coombs (1998, 1999) pointed out, emotions can be used in combinations of situation assessment and organizational responsibility attribution. It is crucial for organizations to better understand the emotionally segmented publics in crises and tailor their crisis responses to facilitate publics' effective crisis coping, which might have positive impact crisis resolutions and reputation repair. Organizations should identify different emotions experienced by publics in various crises, and understand publics' emotional needs and coping strategy preference, so as to strategically choose the most effective response and tailor crisis-handling messages. Organizations should play the role of coping facilitators in the eyes of the publics and utilize sensible and reasonable strategies.

Through the ICM model, the authors hope to provide new directions for crisis model building and a more precise way of shaping crisis response by considering the primary publics' affective reactions. Though much of what the authors have been studying is still exploratory, findings suggest theoretical rigor in the model, with room for further refinements. We are encouraged to continue testing and refining the model so that it is able to stand up to the scrutiny of scholarship from many perspectives. It is our thesis that studies analyzing audience reception in crises should increasingly dominate crisis scholarship, for the simple reason that organizational strategies would be ineffectual if they did not appeal to both the hearts and minds of the publics the organizations are trying to reach.

## References

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*(3): 179–193.

Coombs, W. T. (1999). Information and compassion in crisis responses: A test of their effects. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *11*: 125–142.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2005). An exploratory study of stakeholder emotions: Affect and crises. In N. M. Ashkanasy, W. J. Zerbe, & C. E. J. Härtel (Eds.), *Research on emotion in organizations, Vol. 1* (pp. 263–280). Oxford: Elsevier.

Garg, N., Inman, J., & Mittal, V. (2005). Incidental and task-related affect: A re-inquiry and extension of the influence of affect on choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *32*(1): 154–159.

Jin, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2007). The effects of threat type and duration on public relations practitioners' cognitive, affective, and conative responses in crisis situations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *19*(3): 255–281.

Jin, Y., Pang, A., & Cameron, G. T. (2007a). Integrated crisis mapping: Towards a publics-based, emotion-driven conceptualization in crisis communication. *Sphera Publica*, *7*: 81–96.

Jin, Y., Pang, A., & Cameron, G. T. (2007b). Toward a publics-driven, emotion-based approach in crisis communication: Testing the integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model. *Proceedings of the 10th International Public Relations Research Conference, Miami.*

Jin, Y., Pang, A., & Cameron, G. T. (2008). Developing a publics-driven, emotion-based conceptualization in crisis communication: Second-stage testing of the integrated crisis mapping (Icm) model. Presentation at Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Montreal.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pang, A., Jin, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2007). Building an integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model: Organizational strategies for a publics-driven, emotion-based conceptualization in crisis communication. Presentation at the Annual Conference of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, DC.

Pang, A., Jin, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2008). Second stage development of the integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model in crisis communication: Emo-action language versus emotional language for crises that require high and low organizational engagements. *Proceedings of the 11th International Public Relations Research Conference, Miami.*

Pfau, M., & Wan, H. (2006). Persuasion: An intrinsic function of public relations. In C. H. Botan & V. Hazleton (Eds.), *Public relations theory II* (pp. 101–136). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Raghunathan, R., & Pham, M. T. (1999). All negative moods are not equal: Motivational influences of anxiety and sadness on decision making. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, *79*(1): 56–77.

Raghunathan, R., Pham, M. T., & Corfman, K. P. (2006). Informational properties of anxiety and sadness, and displaced coping. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *32*(4): 596–601.

Turner, M. M. (2006). Using emotion in risk communication: The anger activism model. *Public Relations Review*, *33*(2): 114–119.

Wang, X. T. (2006). Emotions within reason: Resolving conflicts in risk preference. *Cognition and Emotion*, *20*(8): 1132–1152.