DETERMINING CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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Abstract

This study implemented an interpretive social science approach with an egalitarian perspective. It explores the relationship between culture and crisis communication. The researcher created a fictitious organizational crisis, then surveyed participants to gather their insights and guidance as they related to organizational response. The literature reviewed in this study provides detailed examination of crisis and culture. It calls for examination of how the two impact one another in communication settings. Survey questions were derived from Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability, which was the theoretical framework for this study. Efforts were made to include broad participation and incorporate simple random probability samples. The findings were supportive of Hofstede’s theory, as the survey responses generally fell in line with the cultural characteristics described in his theory. Specific examples are provided. Future research should test the findings in a broader capacity to continue examination of the relationship between crisis and culture.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Organizations managing a crisis often times negate or disregard the influential power of culture. Culture can be addressed both within an organization and outside of the organization. Culture can mean crossing national boundaries. Crisis communication plans should account for cultural variables. As our world becomes more globally connected and organizations expand their business to new territory, the issue of cross-cultural crisis communications needs to be addressed as part of organizational growth and development.

Public relations efforts convey organizational values, norms, and perspectives that work to hold together the overall organization (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007). A crisis can take place anywhere at any time. It can involve conflicts within one culture or complications with any number of other cultures. Stakeholders can perceive a crisis as insignificant or extremely detrimental.

Perception can be swayed with proper planning and organizational insight. A plan that addresses current and future organizational concerns can prove to be an invaluable tool in times of organizational crisis. Global public relations practitioners must collaborate with each other to pull together resources, ideas, and strategies that are dispersed in different organizations around the world.

The Problem

Organizational crisis and culture as individual topics have been well researched. Literature linking the two subjects together is less frequent, and often conducted with a western hemisphere bias. This study will attempt to encompass best practice in planning
for organizational crisis, with particular attention paid to the impact and influence of culture.

Crisis management theorists have become increasingly sophisticated in suggesting that the nature of crisis responses can vary considerably. Heath (1997) emphasizes that responses should be selected based upon the severity of the crisis. Coombs (1994) contends that different crisis responses are appropriate, depending upon the locus of responsibility for the crisis (internal-external) and the controllability of the cause (intentional-unintentional). Different responses are appropriate, based whether the crisis involves faux pas, accident, transgression or terrorism (Coombs, 1994).

Literature regarding the impact of culture in crisis communications largely relies on Hofstede’s theory of cultural variability as a measurement tool. Researchers have emphasized a need for further exploration into the impacts of culture in crisis communications, especially in a variety of global environments and circumstances. Exploration and understanding of crisis communications has laid a foundation for examining crisis plans and responses. The three stages of crisis development (pre, during, and post) along with the organizational response requirements provide a blueprint for how organizations should act in a crisis situation. By applying Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability to current crisis communication situations, the impact and considerations of cultural variables should surface.

This research aimed to address how organizations conduct crisis public relations strategies in various parts of the world. The first goal of this research was to understand if crisis communication managers should account for cultural variation when constructing crisis communication plans. The second goal was to discover if there were any cultural
variances consisting of continued change in societies and among their cultural
distinctions. The third goal was to establish an overall pattern of cultural influence on
crisis response including demographic variables such as race, age, and income level.
International crisis communications, organizational crisis response, and current global
public relations environments will be reviewed. The practical and theoretical implications
for international crisis communication are suggested

Definition of Terms Used
1) Crisis: the communication between the organization and its public prior to, during, and
   after the negative occurrence
2) Cultural Variability: basic criteria for describing five different cultural characteristics
3) Social Constructionism: social interaction processes which create a never-ending
   construction of reality
4) Crisis Messages: communication efforts made by an organization in times of crisis
5) Intra-cultural communication: communication within a culture
6) Cross-Cultural Communication: communication from one culture to another culture

Organization of Remaining Chapters
Chapter two details the literature related to crisis and cultural communications. It
addresses the philosophical assumptions and theoretical basis for the study. It also
provides a framework and context for the study. Chapter three addresses the scope and
methodology of the study. It explains how research was collected and what was included
or excluded from the research.
The fourth chapter of this study presents the research product. It builds upon the research and theory in the earlier chapters and demonstrates the practical aspect of the work. It also provides a discussion section to address the meaning and implications of the findings as they relate to the literature review and theory used in the study.

The final chapter summarizes and concludes the study. It details the limitations of the study and addresses areas of further study or additional research. The final portion of this chapter provides a connection back to the philosophical and theoretical basis of the study, as well as the literature review.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Crisis communication is “the communication between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The communications are designed to “minimize damage to the image of the organization” (Fearn-Banks 1996, p.2). Crisis management is frequently described and explained in rigid stages. The three-staged model (Coombs, 1998) has been widely accepted when examining crisis communication. It divides a crisis into three stages:

1. pre-crisis where actions are taken to prevent crisis and to prepare for the occurrence of a crisis;
2. crisis response, actions and words used to address the crisis; and
3. post-crisis, where information is updated and management learns from the crisis.

The goals of crisis communication are to protect stakeholders from harm while protecting the financial wellbeing and reputation of an organization. Communication plays a key role throughout the entire crisis management effort. Crisis-related information must be collected and analyzed before, during, and after an organizational crisis.

Managing the flow and evaluation of crisis-related information is one specific area where current research falls short. Instead, the research focuses more on stakeholder reactions to a crisis. This literature review will focus on managing stakeholder reactions since it is the dominant research focus in crisis communications.
Philosophical Assumptions

This study will approach the topic of culture in crisis communication by addressing the problem from a philosophical egalitarianism perspective. This doctrine maintains that all humans are equal in fundamental worth or social status. Egalitarianism may take many forms: economic, legal, political, gender, race, religion, or asset-based. Approaching the study from this perspective is necessary because in order to determine cultural variances there needs to be consistency across multiple cultures.

An egalitarian believes that the maintenance of equality across a group of people fosters relations of solidarity and community among them. Equality is desirable for that reason. A separate and distinct argument exists as to whether or not people should act or are morally obligated to bring about equality (Nagel, 1991).

Communication Theory

This study will utilize cultural variability and social constructionism as the basis for understanding the impact culture plays in crisis communication efforts. Hofstede’s original work (1980, 1983) established basic criteria for describing five different cultural characteristics. It provides a multicultural perspective to crisis and organizational management.

The five dimensions of cultural variability result from data collected in fifty countries around three regions of the world (Hofstede, 1980, 1983). This work is not without criticism, as it breaks culture down to a form that some scholars argue is just too simplistic to encompass an entire culture. For the purposes of this study, it serves as an excellent tool to address and group large audience perception and constructed reality.
A social constructionist perspective on crisis events emphasizes communication and the social construction of reality. Social constructionism states that social interaction processes are important in the never-ending construction of reality. Social constructionism emphasizes the role that people have in enacting a social reality, and the importance of language in the process (Gergen, 1998).

According to social constructionism, language is not a passive medium that conveys reality. The sense making processes are affected by general undertakings, the member’s perceptual capability, and their expectations (Weick, 1988). Since history has shown that crisis management is largely based on audience perception, it only makes sense to rely on social constructionism as a basis for this study.

Crisis Literature

Crisis response research can be divided into two main areas of concentration: form and content. Research focusing on form considers how an organization should present its response and is based on four requirements developed through scholarly research:

1. Be quick, respond in hour or less.
2. Avoid saying “no comment” because people view it negatively.
3. Be accurate, check all facts carefully.
4. Be consistent, avoid contradictions in statements to stakeholders (Barton, 2001).

Content research focuses more on strategy and revolves around what crisis messages should be communicated to stakeholders. Crisis communication research has focused more on managing stakeholder reactions to a crisis. Researchers have
concentrated on the words and actions managers use to respond to a crisis. These strategies can be broken into three categories (Sturges, 1994): (1) instructing information, (2) adjusting information, and (3) reputation repair.

Instructing information tells stakeholders how to physically prepare themselves for an expected crisis. This literally means the use of warning signals usually coupled with instructions. Adjusting information helps stakeholders cope psychologically with a crisis. Reputation repair encompasses all attempts by an organization to protect or repair organizational perception by stakeholders.

The recent strategy by Domino’s Pizza to market itself as “trying to improve” is a current and relevant example of reputation repair. The organization admits they have made an inferior product but offer promise of improvement and quality. They are attempting to repair their reputation. Of the three categories, reputation repair garners the most attention from scholarly work and research.

Researchers agree that three core elements are involved in an organizational crisis including (1) significant threats, (2) unpredictability, and (3) urgency (Barton, 1993; Lerbinger, 1997). People are unlikely to engage in casual attribution processing when an event is negative, unexpected, or important (Weiner, 1986). Some results indicate that individuals were more likely to attribute responsibility to the organization if they thought the organization crisis was triggered by an internal cause which led them to form a more negative evaluation of the organization (Lee, B., 2004).

Several recent empirical studies support the effects of crisis seriousness on perception of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2002). The serious consequences that a crisis could bring to an organization have drawn the attention of
many scholars to develop some broader range theories on crisis communication (Lee, B., 2005).

A common feature of the traditional research in crisis communication is to perceive crises as a result of some external threats in the surrounding environment (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007). Crises are perceived as objective, something that hits and directly effects an organization. Other research (Coombs, 1998) suggests that a crisis does not just happen but rather it slowly grows and develops. In most cases it begins with a trigger or someone that notices or interprets certain information. This theory provides a natural connection to social constructionism, which has evolved strongly and received a lot of attention in organizational research.

Social constructionism challenges many of the classical issues and concepts traditionally associated with organizational research (organization, crisis, communication, culture, and power). Developed by Gergen (1998), it emphasizes the role people have in enacting a social reality, and the importance of language in the process (Gergen, 1985). A social constructionist perspective on crisis emphasizes communication and the social construction of reality. According to social constructionism, language is not a passive medium that conveys reality. Social constructionism states that social interaction processes are important in the never-ending construction of reality.

Karl E. Weick’s early work on the psychology of organizations may have laid the foundation for social constructionism. His work in crisis communication suggested a crisis doesn’t come up by itself; but rather the members’ sense making processes of changes in or outside the organization slowly enacts a crisis. The sense making processes
are affected by general undertakings, the member’s perceptual capability, and their expectations (Weick, 1988).

One of Wieck’s important contributions to the field of crisis communication is variety requisite. Weick states people can only perceive categories and assumptions they have in their cause maps, which are constructed from earlier experiences (1988). This suggests that organizational management should be composed of people with a wide variety of interests, education, social, and cultural background. With this type of diversity in their management, an organization will be more equipped to detect early stages of critical change in an environment. With more companies crossing national lines to increase business, diversity should be a prerequisite in their crisis communication planning.

While Weick’s contributions to the study of crisis are vast, he does leave some areas for further exploration. Specifically, he does not address how organizations manage relationships with external publics (Lee, 2005). Lee emphasizes that crisis communication is doomed if the weight of organization-stakeholder relationships and communication is not appreciated. “To date, we know surprisingly little about what publics of other cultures expect and how they evaluate and express themselves during an organizational crisis” (Lee, 2005).

**Intercultural Literature**

The approach chosen in a crisis management situation is often times based on a company’s systematic assessment of the situation. This systematic assessment fails to take the issue of culture into account. Intercultural communication can be broken into two main types of activity, communication with one culture (intracultural) and
communication from one culture to another (cross-cultural). Because of globalization, there is an increasing need for public relations practitioners and crisis management action plans to take into considerations the cultural differences if the plan is to be effective.

Crisis management theorists have become increasingly sophisticated in suggesting that the nature of crisis responses can vary considerably. Heath (1997) emphasizes that responses should be selected based upon the severity of the crisis. Coombs (1994) contends that different crisis responses are appropriate, depending upon the locus of responsibility for the crisis (internal-external) and the controllability of the cause (intentional-unintentional). Different responses are appropriate, based whether the crisis involves faux pas, accident, transgression or terrorism (Coombs, 1994).

The issue of culture in crisis management must be addressed to effectively manage crises. Literature in cultural management has acknowledged the importance of an understanding of culture as a significant factor in the effectiveness of a particular strategy.

Overall success and outcomes for similar management strategies in different contexts are often attributed to failure to take into account cultural factors (Gudykunst & Kim, 1999; Olaniran, 2001; 2003). Every crisis is potentially cultural, and since the world is becoming more globalized public relations practitioners can quickly find themselves thrust into unfamiliar cultures (Olaniran, 2001).

Much cultural research involves a “culture-specific approach” in which the focus is to examine the how and why people within a particular culture. Culture is often linked to a particular country, although elements of culture are often shared across nations
(Sriramesh, 1996). Comparing cultures requires identifying isolated characteristics or traits upon which cultures can be analyzed (Blimler, McLeod & Rosengren, 1992).

Various researchers have suggested underlying dimensions to study compare and examine cultures. Kluckholm and Strodtbeck (1961) suggested that cultural values vary on five orientations including: (1) people’s ideas about the character of innate human nature, (2) man’s relationship to nature, (3) the temporal focus of human life, (4) the modality or human activities, and (5) the people’s relationships to others.

The standard in examining culture is cultural variability (Hofstede, 1980, 1983). This work established criteria for describing different cultural characteristics and provided some multicultural perspective to crisis and organizational management. There are five dimensions of cultural variability: (1) power distance, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism/collectivism, (4) Confucian dynamism, and (5) masculinity/femininity.

These five categories result from data collected in fifty countries around three regions of the world (Hofstede, 1980, 1983). Hofstede (1980) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (p.25). Over two decades, Hofstede has demonstrated that differences across cultures can be explained along these five dimensions.

Power distance involves the degree to which organizations and society accept an unequal distribution of power. People in cultures with large power distance relationships accept the differences between superiors and subordinates. They follow orders and do not usually question superiors’ judgments. People in cultures with smaller power distance believe in equality and do not necessarily take orders without challenge.
Uncertainty avoidance involves the extent to which one considers ambiguous situations threatening. Societies strong in this dimension emphasize the need for formal rules, encouraging compliance, and seek to avoid conflict. High uncertainty avoidance also results in greater stress. Significantly, uncertainty avoidance is not equivalent to risk avoidance. High uncertainty avoidance cultures put a premium on planned and deliberate risk taking.

Individualism/collectivism examines the competitive priority placed on the individual versus the collective needs in society. In a highly individualist society people are expected to be independent. Personal responsibility is not expected to extend beyond the nuclear family. In a highly collectivist culture people place value on social harmony and expect others to help one another. Such allegiance encourages compliance with organizational goals. Communication in highly collectivist cultures involves “high context” in which meanings and implications are self-evident. They do not need to be stated explicitly and need little explanation. However, communication in highly individualistic cultures often requires information to be stated explicitly.

Confucian dynamism consists of values based on longer-versus shorter-term orientations in life. Individuals in short-term oriented societies want quick results, whereas people in longer-term (more Confucian) cultures persevere and are willing to accept results. People in short-term societies put a premium in finding truth, while people in longer-term societies are concerned with the demands of virtue. Hofstede argues that a non-Confucian orientation tends to promote “concern with ‘face’” or reputation, while ignoring the common interests of the society as a whole.
Masculinity/femininity involves the traits and behaviors traditionally assigned to men versus women in society. In masculine cultures people place high value on clearly distinct gender roles, performance and ambition. By contrast, people in feminine cultures emphasize role sharing, quality of life, service and interdependence. Individuals in masculine cultures are motivated to achieve, place work at the center of their lives, accept employers’ interference with their lives, and accept high job-related stress as a part of life.

These dimensions have been justified through research and study to help create a best practice model in cultural difference study and effects on uncertainty reduction in intercultural communication encounters (Gudykunst, Chua & Gray, 1987; Olaniran, 1996; Olaniran & Stewart, 1996). Although cultural variability is a pillar in the field of intercultural communications, the theory is not without criticism (McSweeney, 2002, p. 113). The main criticism being that the theory is static, not taking into account social changes, power, diversity or situational contexts. McSweeney claims it may actually enforce national cultural stereotypes instead of helping find solutions to cultural problems.

Intercultural communication as a field of study tends to have a rather traditional western-biased field perspective. A majority of the studies are quantitative, comparative and conducted by Western scholars (Barnett & Lee, 2002). As a result of its origins in Western thought, little attention has been paid to cross-cultural aspects of crisis communications. Most of the crisis management models are regarded as highly ethnocentric and based on Western cultures. This means approaches to problems are based on one culture and deemed appropriate across all situations and cultures.
Ethnocentric assumptions and theories reflect biases of the society in which those assumptions originate and are generally not applicable across cultures (Vercic, L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1996).

Ethnocentrism in management communication theory assumes that practices in one country are suitable or ideal in a different part of the world. Although many global organizations follow the US principles, this limitation raises questions of whether or not the US theories, practices, and assumptions are appropriate across cultures (Sturges et al., 1994).

The quantitative bias in traditional research does not encompass complex relations including economic, educational and political factors, and communication in an intercultural environment. International crisis managers must handle unfamiliar stakeholders and environments. To be effective, international crisis managers must appreciate and understand how culture, the news media, and legal requirements shape crisis communication practices.

**Summary of the Literature**

Crisis management theorists have become increasingly sophisticated in suggesting that the nature of crisis responses can vary considerably. Heath (1997) emphasizes that responses should be selected based upon the severity of the crisis. Coombs (1994) contends that different crisis responses are appropriate, depending upon the locus of responsibility for the crisis (internal-external) and the controllability of the cause (intentional-unintentional). Different responses are appropriate, based whether the crisis involves faux pas, accident, transgression or terrorism (Coombs, 1994).
Literature regarding the impact of culture in crisis communications largely relies on Hofstede’s theory of cultural variability as a measurement tool. Researchers have emphasized a need for further exploration into the impacts of culture in crisis communications, especially in a variety of global environments and circumstances. Exploration and understanding of crisis communications has laid a foundation for examining crisis plans and responses. The three stages of crisis development along with the organizational response requirements provide a blueprint for how organizations should act in a crisis situation. By applying Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability to current crisis communication plans, the impact and considerations of cultural variables should surface.

Research Questions

1. To what degree should crisis communication managers account for cultural variation when constructing crisis communication plans?

2. Is cultural variability still applicable given the communication medium developments of the last two decades?

3. Can global generalizations regarding culture develop a best practice method for crisis communication plans?
Chapter 3
Scope and Methodology

This chapter describes the scope and methodology of this study. It includes what has been included and excluded in the course of this study. The chapter examines the scope of the research. It builds a full understanding of how and why participants were selected for the study. It also addresses what may be missing in the study. This understanding is followed by a description of the methodology used in the study. The methodology explains how and why the study chose a quantitative survey type method to answer the research questions addressed in chapter 2. This explanation of methodology allows for a systematic approach to the analysis, conclusion, and implication sections presented in the final chapters of this research paper.

Scope

The scope of this study focused specifically on crisis communication professionals who design and implement crisis communication plans. The goal was to flesh out if and how the professionals account for cultural variability in a given crisis. They were given a crisis scenario and asked to respond to a survey and open-ended questionnaire.

The overall scope of the research was limited to members of one professional public relations organization. This group should not be considered a representation of all the global organizations that deal with organizational crisis, as that representation could be impossible to achieve. Instead, the group was open to professionals and organizations from all parts of the world, which offered potential for a multicultural environment.
The scope included a relatively small portion of professionals who reside and work in various regions of the globe. This could allow for a narrow focus in these regions and not truly represent that region. A study more concentrated in the respondents specific regions could support or contradict the findings in this thesis.

Methodology

Sampling

It was the desire to include professionals from a wide variety of physical locations, as to encompass a global representation. It was also the desire to encompass professionals from a wide variety of organization types. The study viewed crisis communication managers as a group, which shared common goals and characteristics, despite their individual organizational identities and environments.

The respondents were selected because of their affiliation to the professional communication association “International Public Relations Society”. Being a member of this professional organization represented the respondents (and their organizations) commitment to professionalism and global connection.

There are plenty of crisis communication professionals who are not a member of this organization. Including these individuals in the study could broaden the scope of this study. Due to time constraints, this study chose to focus on this key group of communication professionals. The organization was selected because it identified global connection as a key element to its mission and foundation. Having that awareness of global connection may have caused a heightened cultural awareness, which the study was willing to accept.
Survey Research Procedures

This thesis used survey research as a data collection method given the relatively short time allowed to gather and analyze the research findings. Surveys have been a proven tool for researchers wanting efficient and productive gathering of data (Rubin, 2004).

The survey and questionnaire was conducted using an online survey tool called Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). This tool was chosen because of its ease of use and distribution. Survey Monkey was also chosen because of financial and environmental considerations by the researcher. The tool is free and paperless, saving money and resources.

Questions for the survey were designed to draw out Hofstede’s theory of cultural variability by including elements of power distance, individualism, masculinity, level uncertainty avoidance, and orientation. Each question offered the respondent the opportunity to expound upon and justify their answer. The hopes were the comments would draw out the underlying cultural components that led to the respondent’s decision. The multiple choice questions were more designed to lead the respondent into self reflection but could also serve as hard evidence of how a multicultural group of public relations professionals would take action in a given situation.

Data Analysis

Since the theory used to justify the method for this study was largely based on regional distinctions, the respondents were grouped according to global regions. This was done to offer an overall global perspective of the study.
The results were then broken down by the multiple choice question responses and presented as percentages (ie: question 1: group A answered 67% for a). The comments were then grouped using a cluster technique (ie: group A commented moral responsibility as a motivating factor for their decision).

Ethics, Reliability, Validity

Members of the group received an email inviting them to complete the survey. The sampling method was broad to include all members of the organization and provide enough feedback to draw large-scale conclusions about the group and profession as a whole. The sampling was random only in that the organization had limited membership restrictions. This allows for a certain level of variety and could be perceived as random.

The original email contained a brief introduction from the researcher, which indicated the purpose of the research and extended an invitation to complete the survey. It did not make any attempts to have the survey forwarded to other members of the respondents’ professional organization. The email also informed potential respondents of their anonymity and expressed gratitude for their participation.

The survey tool did not track who received the survey or who completed it. It was sent out to all members of the organization. The researcher did not gather a list of the organizational members before sending out the survey. This also ensured for anonymity among the participants as their names and organizations were never revealed to the researcher.

There were geographical identifiers included in an attempt to account for regional cultural variances among the participants. It’s reasonable to assume that if someone were to access the organizations database and cross reference the geographic data collected in
In this study, anonymity could be sacrificed. The researcher made sufficient effort to maintain the integrity and anonymity of the survey. The organization has an equal responsibility to maintain integrity and anonymity of its members.

The survey questions were created with the goal to gain an in-depth understanding of the role culture plays in crisis communication planning and implementation. The survey contained several sections designed to draw out cultural components identified in the literature review chapter of this study.

The first section requested demographic information. Respondents were asked to indicate their current employment status, sex, race, age, geographic location, and nature of their organizational business. The second section of the survey presented the respondents with a case study based on a real world scenario. It led to questions specifically designed to draw out a variety of cultural characteristics and distinctions.

Responses were ranked on a five-point scale in order to provide efficient and effective data comparison. The final section of the survey provided the respondents an opportunity to address the scenario in a series of open-ended questions. The questions were designed to draw out participants’ perspectives and expertise that may have been overlooked in the earlier portion of the survey.

The survey contained specific and precise direction for completing each section. Only surveys where all items were completed were considered valid and included in the final analysis for the study. A copy of the survey and the email sent out to initial respondents is located in the appendix of this research paper.
Chapter 4

The Study

This study was conducted during the week of March 12 through March 18 and April 1 through 7, 2012. The study utilized a survey of members from the International Public Relations Society. The organization’s president preferred to use the professional networking website LinkedIn in order to ask for participants rather than emailing each member of the organization individually.

At the beginning of each data collection week, an email was sent to each member of the group. Respondents were asked to go to the website where the survey existed if they wanted to participate. The data was gathered during and later analyzed as research for this study.

Data Analysis

Overall participation in the study was low. Approximately eighty-seven members of the International Public Relations Association were asked to participate in this study. Of the eighty-seven members, forty-two opened the website and viewed the survey. Of the forty-two that viewed the survey, twenty-two completed the majority of the questions. The overall completed participation rate was approximately twenty-five percent.

The first portion of the survey asked participants which country they were raised in and in which country they currently work. All participants were raised and worked in the same country. Several were from the United States, and there was at least one participant from each of the following countries: China, England, Germany, Argentina, and Russia.
The second portion of the survey was presented using a case study loosely based on an actual public relations crisis that could occur anywhere in the world. The scenario asked the respondents to offer their opinion and guidance as public relations professionals in guiding the organization through the crisis.

In questions two through nine, respondents were given multiple-choice answers and asked to justify their response with open-ended comments. Question ten was completely open ended and offered no multiple-choice responses.

Results of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine if cultural distinctions would surface in the face of organizational crisis response and planning. Participation in the survey was lower than expected but did yield broad results that could be developed by additional research.

The respondent’s answers and comments generally fell in line with Hofstede’s theory of cultural variability. The US, for example, exhibits a high degree of individualism according to Hofstede’s theory. Chart one (below) displays the participant countries and corresponding attributes as they relate to Hofstede’s theory.
The respondents from the United States answered in very similar fashion and their open comments displayed a high degree of individualism. In question seven, for example, all U.S. participants suggested the university should issue a sympathetic statement or apology, but as a group the determined that reaching out to the victims would be a misstep. “I would not recommend reaching out to the family and in this situation it would probably not be recommended from a legal standpoint as well. I would, however, recommend a public apology.”

An English participant suggested the university issue an apology in addition to reaching out to the victims “To demonstrate that they DO actually care, are sorry the matter wasn't dealt with appropriately, to mitigate damage and ensure the victim is 'coping'.” This example supports Hofstede’s claims that the United States and England have different culture values regarding individualism and collectivism.

Additional evidence to support Hofstede’s theory can be found in the responses to question ten. The participants whose countries who show a lower power distance (U.S.,
Argentina) listed characteristics like sincere, genuine, and relatable as important features for someone who should represent the university. “The public has to relate to the spokesperson and also believe that they are sincere.”

A Chinese participant, on the other hand, only addressed the authority level of the spokesperson and did not mention these traits in the response. “Dean; Serious, concerned but judicious and cognisant of the process of law. Do not prejudice the criminal charges.” This evidence suggests that in the Chinese culture, power distance and class are an important factor in choosing an organizational representative when dealing with an organizational crisis.

Discussion

This portion of the chapter will address the research questions outlined in earlier portions of the research paper. While the overall low participation rate was too low to yield sufficient statistical results, there was beneficial data gathered to address the research questions.

1. To what degree should crisis communication managers account for cultural variation when constructing crisis communication plans? The data gathered in this research suggests that crisis communication managers should be aware of the theory of cultural variation. Responses to the questions generally supported the theory as it related to the country’s traits. The examples listed in the results portion of the paper were the two most obvious examples. Additional detailed analysis supports more findings that crisis communication managers account for cultural variation when constructing crisis communication plans.
2. Is cultural variability still applicable given the communication medium developments of the last two decades? The data gathered in this research suggests this theory is still applicable given the communication medium developments of the last two decades. While the method and ability to communicate has changed drastically, this data indicates the characteristics that define a culture remain intact despite communication circumstances.

3. Can global generalizations regarding culture develop a best practice method for crisis communication plans? Additional research is needed to fully address this research question. The small sampling provided in this research indicates that individuals dealing with crisis within a culture will generally follow the findings of Hofstede’s cultural variation. The characteristics of each culture impacted by a crisis could provide a template for planning and responding to crisis scenarios.

The following chapter will discuss the results of this study in light of the philosophical implications and theoretical underpinnings. It will also look clearly at the limitations of this work and suggest future research on this topic.
Chapter 5

Limitations of the Study

This study built on previous research addressing communications culture and crisis by providing a pathway for future research exploring the connection between these topics. The study used a broad and global perspective in order to provide direction for more narrow future research. A major limitation of this study (and possibly of Hofstede’s theory as a whole) is the assumption that the opinions and recommendations of a few members could represent and entire culture. However, it is a basic anthropological concept that one member of a culture can be an informant for the entire culture.

It could be argued that such a small sample size could not adequately represent a population or culture. The research defined culture by region and country. It could be argued that culture cannot be defined by these boundaries. For the purposes of this study and to weigh the results against Hofstede’s theory, the research needed to accept this definition of culture. This definition does not account for variations and cultures within a culture. This factor could greatly impact the outcome of similar studies.

The research instrument for this study may also have limited the results of the study. The survey did not allow for any follow up questioning by the researcher. A focus group or interview format would have allowed for more detailed responses and could have drawn out additional findings.

An additional limitation of this study was the nature of the respondents. They were all professional public relations practitioners and may therefore not be representative individuals within their culture or society. Their viewpoints may not necessarily communicate the ideals and beliefs of their corresponding society. The
researcher felt it was important to start this research with this group as their actions and interpretations of events directly determine courses of action in their given organizations.

Further Study

The most logical step for future research would be to conduct a series of more concentrated studies. The studies would take place in various regions to determine if cultural variability remains consistent across several cultures when dealing with organizational crisis. A concentrated study in very specific regions would allow the researcher to provide a more representative sample of the corresponding culture or population and the intricacy within that society.

Future research could also examine the relationship of crisis and culture from a public consumer perspective. It may differ and provide insight on the interpretations of a population more representative of the culture being studied rather than a professional group within the culture.

Finally, as mentioned in the limitations section above, future research should consider utilizing additional research tools such as interviews or focus groups to gather data. The use of these tools would allow the researcher to explore unplanned areas of discussion. The opportunity to ask and develop follow up questions could lead to more detailed findings.

Conclusions

This study has shown that Hofstede’s theory of cultural variability should be an important tool for communications professionals who are dealing with organizational crisis. The findings support a higher calling to treat all cultures with equal worth and
social status. Approaching crisis response from this egalitarian perspective is essential for successful crisis response.

The findings show varying values between cultures. Organizations dealing with crisis should be aware of these differing values, not to provide judgment on them, but to account for their impact and perspective during communication activities. The maintenance of equality across a group of people fosters relations of solidarity and community among them. The findings in this study stress the importance of culture and community as they relate to social constructionism and perceived reality.

The physical location of the crisis and the organization impacted by the crisis could determine an appropriate course of action for a successful organizational response to crisis. The literature review provided a detailed account of the study of crisis as well as the study of culture. It called for additional research to examine the relationship between the two. This study has provided a path for future research to explore and develop the connections between the perceptions of crisis and the appropriate organizational responses as they relate to culture.
References


Appendix A

Crisis Communication Survey

Instructions: please type your response to the following demographic information in the answer portion of the question.

Demographics:

1) What city and country were you raised in?
   What city and country do you live/work in now?

   Answer:

Instructions: please familiarize yourself with the following case study then proceed to the related question portion of the survey.

Case:
You have been hired to consult “University A” on how to handle a potential criminal sexual conduct case involving a publicly known university employee. The media is not yet aware of the situation but will become aware once charges are filed. You are asked to guide the university board of regents on their handling of the situation. Below are the facts:

- The employee’s manager was long-ago informed of the activity who, in turn, informed the university president but did not notify law enforcement
- The president determined there was not enough evidence to take action at the time and directed the manager to disregard the activity

Questions:

Instructions: Answer the following questions as they relate the case study provided above. Please type your answer in the answer area. Use the comment area to provide rationale for your response.

2) Who should be held most accountable for their actions? (rank in order)
   a) Employee
   b) Manager
   c) President

   Answer:
   Comments:

3) When should action(s) be taken with the employees?
   a) Immediately
   b) When charges are filed
   c) After the criminal case is completed

   Answer:
   Comments:
4) What actions should be taken with the President?
   a) None
   b) Training
   c) Fired

   Answer:
   Comments:

5) Would the location (on or off university property) of the criminal activity impact your plan of action?
   a) Yes
   b) No

   Answer:
   Comments:
   If yes, how and why:

6) What actions should be taken with the Manager?
   a) None
   c) Training
   d) Fired

   Answer:
   Comments:

7) Does the university have a social responsibility to reach out to the victims’ and their families?
   a. Yes
   b. No

   Answer:
   Comments:

8) What actions should be taken with the Employee?
   a. None
   b. Training
   c. Fired

   Answer:
   Comments:

9) Does offering sympathy to victims equate to an admission of guilt on the part of the university?
a. Yes
b. No

Answer:
Comments:

10) Describe the characteristics of the perfect spokesperson to represent the university in this situation.

Answer:

Why are the feature listed in your answer for question nine appropriate for this situation?

Answer:

11) Describe your overall plan for the universities handling of the situation.

Answer: