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The Voice of Victims: Positive Response to a Natural Disaster Crisis

Frances L M. Smith
Murray State University

Tina Coffelt
Iowa State University, tcoffelt@iastate.edu

April P. Rives
Regent University

Michael Solitto
West Virginia University

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The Voice of Victims: Positive Response to a Natural Disaster Crisis

Abstract

In the current study the authors investigate victims' response to a natural disaster crisis event. Crisis communication research has often considered organizations, but neglected the voice of the victims. Similarly, most crisis research emphasizes the negative outcomes of crisis. Positive communication research and sensemaking theory provide insight into the experiences of crisis victims. Twenty-nine individuals were interviewed from one community in Western Kentucky following a massive ice storm that occurred during January 2009. The remembering emphasis of sensemaking was salient in this study. Victims remembered their overall experience through positive terms and positive interpersonal communication. Communities and organizations alike can use this research to consider how their members may respond to crises and create messages based on these results.

Disciplines

Communication

The Voice of Experience: Positive Response to a Natural Disaster Crisis

Abstract

The current study investigates victims' response to a natural disaster crisis event. Crisis communication research has often considered organizations, but neglected the voice of the victims. Similarly, most crisis research emphasizes the negative outcomes of crisis. Positive communication research and sensemaking theory provide insight into the experiences of crisis victims. Twenty-nine individuals were interviewed from one community in Western Kentucky following a massive ice storm that occurred during January 2009. The remembering emphasis of sensemaking was salient in this study. Victims remembered their overall experience through positive terms and positive interpersonal communication. Communities and organizations alike can use this research to consider how their members may respond to crises and create messages based on these results.

The Voice of Experience: Positive Response to a Natural Disaster Crisis

Natural disasters have a great impact on the communities they strike (Comfort, Sungu, Johnson, & Dunn, 2001). Members of these communities play a critical role in natural disaster response as individuals cope with loss, flee devastated areas, or volunteer to help the neediest victims. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) assert that crisis discourse is often about "harm, responsibility, fault, culpability, blame, guilt, liability, compensation, and victimage" (p. 126). However, some crisis situations can foster "potentially positive relationships" (Sellnow, Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 283) or renewal (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Victims' voices in these relationships are often usurped in the crisis communication research by an organizational and managerial bias, yet their voices are an important inclusion to develop a comprehensive understanding of crisis events (Waymer & Heath, 2007). Previous approaches privilege organizational discourse and do not account for the victims and how they respond to crisis situations. What is known about victims' response has shown negative communication after a crisis (Lachlan & Spence, 2007; Lachlan, Burke, Spence, & Griffin, 2009). Positive responses to crisis events have not been associated with post-crisis communication. The current study investigates victims' response to a natural disaster crisis event using sensemaking theory (Weick, 2001) while considering positive communication.

Sensemaking Theory and Positivity

Sensemaking describes reality as "an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make sense of what occurs" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). During a crisis, those affected work to create order out of chaos and make sense of events that are non-routine. Weick (2001) notes four phases of sensemaking—enactment, selection, retention, and remembering.(Author citation) analyzed the enactment and selection phases of a natural disaster

crisis and found that, during the enactment phase, victims shifted from the television as their primary source of information before the storm to radio after the storm. Further, over half of these victims continued to do what they were doing when they heard the news about the approaching storm (Author citation). The current study follows (Author citation) and continues to probe into victims' experiences by focusing on the remembering phase of sensemaking. Remembering their actions retrospectively, members produce stories about the natural disaster post-crisis, which are then communicated to others and retained for future crises.

During the remembering phase of sensemaking, victims have the opportunity to choose their response and characterization of the event. While previous research has labeled crises as primarily negative (Lachlan & Spence, 2007; Lachlan, Burke, Spence, & Griffin, 2009), positivity research shows that stressful events can be remembered positively and that positive affect can help people cope (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003). In fact, resiliency during times of crisis is linked with positive emotions (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Therefore, it is important to examine crisis events in which victims remember the crisis with positive communication.

The 2009 Western Kentucky Ice Storm Natural Disaster

Residents of Western Kentucky experienced an unprecedented phenomenon in late January 2009 when 91 counties were burdened with two rounds of ice precipitation. The Tennessee Valley Authority was unable to produce electricity for several days and power lines were down throughout the region. The effects were compounded in Calloway County where a water main break left thousands of residents without water. Further, an AT&T cellular phone tower buckled from the weight of the ice, leaving many residents without service. Credit card machines and cash registers could not ring up sales, ATM machines could not dispense cash, gas

pumps were inoperable, the few open stores had diminishing supplies and made only cash sales, among many other anomalies. The event was such a devastating phenomenon that Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear stated it was the "biggest natural disaster the commonwealth has ever experienced" (CNN, 2009). The experiences of these victims inform this study as it extends crisis communication research by asking the following question:

RQ: How do natural disaster crisis victims frame their experience during the remembering phase of sensemaking?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Twenty-nine victims (see appendix A) from Calloway County, Kentucky participated in the study. Participants were restricted by location in order to ensure similar ice storm experiences. Interviews were conducted by all members of the research team. Snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was utilized to gather participants. Researchers worked to maximize demographic variety of participants such that they represented a variety of ages and educational and income levels. Researchers used an interview guide and recorded interviews with a digital voice recorder. Data were downloaded in a secure, confidential location for transcription purposes. On average, interviews lasted approximately 27 minutes with the longest interview lasting approximately 52 minutes. Interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Analysis

Transcriptions of the interviews produced 186 pages of single-spaced data. Preliminary themes were discussed by all researchers during the transcription process. Thematic analysis was then conducted by the first author. Analysis involves a process of data management,

reduction, and conceptual development (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative data management software, which aids the researcher in sorting qualitative data sets. Once added to the program, transcripts were coded based on emergent themes. Meaningful phrases were named with codes, which were later connected through categories. During this process, a separate file for notes was created to aid the researcher in conceptual development. Themes were noted based on their recurrence, strength, and persistence within the data. The analysis resulted in multiple categories consisting of various codes. The codes and categories were reviewed by the researchers through verbal discussion. After the initial analysis, the first author re-visited the data from the perspective of the collective story (Richardson, 1990b). "The collective story displays an individual's story by narativizing the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs" (Richardson, 1990b, p. 25). Often collective stories focus on particularly marginalized individuals (Richardson, 1990a). In this case, the collective story was written from the perspective of the victims of the ice storm.

Verification

The results of this analysis were then verified to confirm the credibility and transferability of the results (Creswell, 2003). First, this analysis was verified through member check, which means returning to the field and asking participants to verify the accuracy of the results. Three participants responded to the member check and agreed with the results. The second form of verification was triangulation of the investigators (Creswell, 2003). All four authors interviewed participants and participated in the analysis through discussion before, during, and after data collection to apply diverse perspectives to the process.

Results

Positive Communication

Community members of Calloway County, Kentucky remembered their ice storm experience collectively as a positive experience. Positivity includes past, present, and future feelings of happiness, fulfillment, and well-being (Fineman, 2006). Through communication, sensemaking of past events can influence feelings of positivity through the delineation of benefits (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997). Community members participated in sensemaking and described the ice storm in real, yet positive terms. Members said "it was a horrible experience, but it was still a good experience." While the ice storm caused an obvious disruption to the lives of those affected, participants described the event through two main themes: *positive terms* and *positive interpersonal communication*.

First, community members described the experience using *positive terms*. Community members saw the ice storm experience as fun and adventurous. Some described the ice storm as "a little bit of an adventure," "definitely like an adventure," and "it was a thrill." They also said "it was a lot of fun" and "it was a good time." One community member who was a student at the local university said, "overall, I feel like it was a good experience. You know, there are memories that I'll have with me forever… it'll probably go down as one of my favorite times in college." While some saw the ice storm as a fun adventure, others described it as "definitely a good learning experience." In fact, one community member said "we learn[ed] that by working together we can get through it."

Positive interpersonal communication was another factor described by the Calloway County community. The need for face-to-face interpersonal communication was heightened during the ice storm due to the lack of normal technology. In fact, some community members described the shock of being unable to use cell phones and computers. One member described it this way, "I am constantly on Facebook. I check my email constantly… It's just, you know, it's

weird because now like with all this technological stuff, you know,…it's less about face-to-face contact and communication, but …more um electronic. I think [the ice storm] kinda helped and …I had more face-to-face interaction than I would, cause…I just didn't have the option…and I think that was a really good thing."

Many people had to gather together to find places to stay where they could keep warm. For some, that meant staying with family members or friends who had gas fireplaces or generators. Due to this communal living experience, community members discussed how they spent time communicating with family members or friends more than usual. As people gathered together they spent time "talking and playing cards and spending time that way. And reminiscing…and things that would probably not have been done otherwise." They also, "spent time playing board games together and got to know each other." Others described it as a time of "building friendships." In fact, experiencing an unusual event like this became a novelty. "The four people we spent time with…they're our closest friends, but you know, we'd never been through anything like that with them…we actually had a lot of fun after we realized that we had heat and we had water and there's enough food on the back porch to feed all of us for a few days…there wasn't fear involved at all…We just kind of had a good time." Some described the ice storm as, "a bonding time for me and my son" or being "home with the family and…just kind of talk to each other, uh, play games together…it was nice and quiet…it was pretty peaceful."

Community members agreed that the residents of Calloway County gathered together to make this a positive experience. As some described, "I think it pulled the community together and showed the character of people here that we generally care about our fellow community members," "[the ice storm] pulled the community together, helping each other out," and "the whole community pulled together and…did a really great job." One said, "I was…really

impressed with the whole city and community and um, just the whole experience. [I] was pretty impressed with Murray as a whole. I think everybody kind of came together and…made it through." Due to the outstanding community support, those who worked with emergency services felt good about the response stating, "I don't think there was a single problem that wasn't manageable."

Through this collective story derived from members of the Calloway County community, it is clear that this ice storm is described through *positive terms* and *positive interpersonal communication*. There is a stark contrast in these descriptors versus previous natural disaster responses (Lachlan & Spence, 2007; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). The community members of Calloway County seemed to find the benefits in a stressful event rather than focusing on the negative issues surrounding it. Their voices echo the victims of house fires who discussed life lessons and the helpfulness of others as reasons to find benefit in an otherwise difficult experience (Tennen & Affleck, 2002).

Discussion

Sensemaking Theory, Positivity and Victims' Response

The results of this study relate to the ongoing remembering emphasis of sensemaking and positive communication. Weick (1995) contends that interruptions, such as a crisis, result in negative emotions when the catalyst is unexpected and believed to be harmful. However, the participants in this study noted a positive response overall when reflecting back on their lived experiences. Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) found that individuals first engage in sensemaking and later discover benefits from the experience. Remembering the crisis with positive communication may help victims cope with the event (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, and Fletcher (2011) found that "positive emotions

are social; they are about and in response to other people" (p. 20). Discussing the growth of interpersonal communication and relationships during the ice storm produced positive emotions in many participants. Certainly the type of threat presented by a storm and the magnitude of its consequences are important in evaluating the overall response to a crisis situation (Jin & Cameron, 2007). However, this specific natural disaster crisis event presents one example of positive response by victims during their remembering phase of sensemaking.

Implications

The positive discourse expressed by victims during the remembering phase of sensemaking stands in contrast to other crisis situations. Other crises have shown the outrage experienced by victims (e.g., Lachlan & Spence, 2007; Lachlan, Burke, Spence, & Griffin, 2009). Negative consequences to crisis events are the impetus for many organizations to plan and prepare crisis response strategies. However, evidence of positive communication post-crisis reminds us that benefits can be the result of stressful events. Message designers for organizations, media outlets, and governmental agencies should be mindful of the unique attributes of the victims they serve and determine if positive communication can occur post-crisis. The data from this study also show that victims respond to crisis situations in differing ways, which further reiterates the need for relief messengers to consider some of the unique ways victims react to crisis situations.

The positive communication expressed here shows that one way community members feel positively towards a crisis event is through interpersonal communication. Crisis managers can encourage the development of strong community relationships prior to crises, which may serve to create positive communication after the crisis. In fact, the ability to frame events in a positive light following a crisis is "one of the most important strategies an organization can

employ to move beyond a crisis" (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011, p. 59). Working to build community relationships prior to a crisis may increase positive communication pre-crisis, therefore encouraging renewal post-crisis. Likewise, individuals who experience positive emotions more often become more resilient during stressful times (Fredrickson, 2001). Therefore, encouraging positive communication following a crisis can benefit both the individual and the organization.

Limitations

These data were collected approximately five months after the ice storm. Therefore, the time lag may have distorted some of the details of participants' ice storm narratives. However, we advocate that the participants were able to recall the salient information about their ice storm experiences, and sensemaking theory permits plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, senemaking and positive communication are important to finding benefits in an otherwise difficult event (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997). Allowing time for participants to make sense of the ice storm may have contributed to their positive communication. The current study shows that crisis situations can be managed well and regarded positively overall. Future research should continue to examine other examples of crisis situations that were handled well and led to positive outcomes.

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Appendix A

Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Education	Marital Status	Number of Children at Home	Occupation	Area of Residence	Place of Residence
Alice	35	F	African-American	Masters	M	2	Compliance Coordinator	Murray	Rent
Bill	34	M	African-American	Some college	M	2	Unemployed	Murray	Rent
Carrie	28	F	Caucasian	Ph.D.	M	0	Assistant Professor	Calloway	Own
Don	52	M	Caucasian	Masters	M	0	Consultant	Murray	Own
Evelyn	84	F	Caucasian	GED	W	0	Retired	Calloway	Own
Francine	39	F	Caucasian	High School	M	1	Kenlake Foods	Calloway	Own
Gwen	59	F	African-American	High School	W	0	Unit Secretary	Murray	Rent
Hunter	35	M	Caucasian	Bachelors	M	0	Chemical Operator/Former	Calloway	Own
Irene	64	F	Caucasian	Masters	D	0	Education Administrator	Murray	Own
John	41	M	Caucasian	High School	D	0	Construction Contractor	Murray	Rent
Karen	49	F	Caucasian	Masters	S	0	Training Specialist	Calloway	Own
Lillian	36	F	Caucasian	Associate	D	2	Office Assistant	Calloway	Own
Mark	49	M	Caucasian	Masters	M	2	Minister	Murray	Own
Nora	46	F	African-American	Post Grad	M	0	Professor/Administrator	Calloway	Own
Oscar	27	M	Caucasian	Bachelors	S	0	Safety, Health, Environmental	Student	Rent

Paula	21	F	Caucasian	Some college	S	0	Student	Student	Rent
Quisha	24	F	Caucasian	Some college	S	0	Student	Student	Rent
Ronald	38	M	Caucasian	Masters	M	3	Executive Director	Murray	Own
Steven	29	M	Caucasian	Bachelors	S	0	Management	Calloway	Own
Tula	34	F	Caucasian	Bachelors	M	1	Executive Director, ARC	Murray	Own
Vernon	62	M	Caucasian	Masters	M	0	Retired; PT Director of Emergency Mgmt	Calloway	Own
William	19	M	Caucasian	High School	S	0	Student	Murray	Own
Yvonne	22	F	Caucasian	Some college	S	0	Student/teacher	Murray	Rent
Adam	23	M	Caucasian	Bachelors	M	2	PTL	Student	Rent
Brandon	30	M	Caucasian	Bachelors	M	1	Pastor	Calloway	Caretakers of home
Catherine	48	F	Caucasian	Masters/Rank 1	M	0	Teacher	Calloway	Own
Darren	20	M	Caucasian	Some college	S	0	Student	Student	Residential College
Evan	20	M	Caucasian	Some college	S	0	Student	Murray	Rent
Grace	21	F	African-American	Some college	S	0	Student	Student	Residential College