

## Editorial: The Contingency Perspective to Crisis Management

Q1 Sanneke Kuipers

The crisis and disaster literature has come a long way, from a focus on unique cases with little external validity of each separate analysis, to a more encompassing approach of 'all hazards' and a variety of crises that reveal more patterns and common characteristics than previously acknowledged (Kalbassi, 2017; Topper & Lagadec, 2013). In addition, scholars moved from a more limited event focus to an approach that includes the accumulation of deficiencies and anomalies that precede events in the weeks, months or years prior, and they also increasingly study the psychosocial aftermath of crises (Dückers, Yzermans, Jong, & Boin, 2017; La Porte, 2018; Roux-Dufort, 2007).

Yet because of a predominance of case studies, the type of crisis is still often treated as a 'given' rather than a variable. Patrick Kenis, Schol, Kraaij-Dirkzwager, and Timen (2019), argue that the crisis literature should adopt a contingency perspective to threats and crises. The contingency perspective holds that no single best response to threats or crises exists. Rather appropriate responses are contingent upon the crisis type or task at hand. The crisis literature unfortunately does offer limited guidance in terms of distinguishing crisis types and relating those to more or less effective responses (Kalbassi, 2017).

In this issue of *Risk, Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy*, Patrick Kenis, Lianne Schol, Marleen Kraaij-Dirkzwager and Aura Timen discuss the contingency perspective in relation to the governance of infectious disease threats. The authors first categorize infectious disease threats in terms of complexity (varying between simple, complicated and complex) on the dimensions 'knowledge', 'expertise' and 'scope'. If a threat scores high on zero or one out of three dimensions, it is relatively simple. If the pending crisis raises flags on two dimensions, the situation becomes complicated and if a situation checks all the boxes: complexity rules. The authors argue that different network governance approaches are appropriate for the different degrees of complexity. The infectious diseases in the most complex category requires a 'core-periphery network' to adapt flexibly to the trying conditions of a

Journal RHC3	MSP No. 12177	Dispatch: August 17, 2019 No. of Pages: 9	CE:	PE: Lee Jeying



rapidly evolving situation (the scope: spread, velocity, severity) which is simultaneously characterized by high uncertainty (the 'unknown-ness' of the disease) and/or the escalation of societal and political interest (the perception dimension).

The other articles in the current issue of RHCPP share the contingency approach with the authors above. Amber Silver's contribution, 'Public Attention to Risks, Hazards and Disasters: A Retrospective Review and Proposed Conceptual Model' discusses the role of public attention starting from the moment of initial exposure, through the iterative process of sense making, leading to responsive behavior in relation to risks or disasters. She studies patterns of communication and response in cases of extreme weather events. The article highlights how individual attention to and interpretation of risk and impending disaster is a very social process, where a critical mass defines which issues gain traction, where group members self-moderate misinformation, and collectively interpret new information through for instance social media (Silver, 2019).

Veronica Strandh also looks at crises and disasters across the board, focusing on the diversity of voluntary engagement in crisis management in her article "Crisis Volunteerism is the New Black?" In line with the contingency approach addressed by Kenis et al. (2019), she claims that different types of voluntary engagement can be discerned (hence, different responses), and that they take on different roles, in response to different types of crises. Volunteers from faith-based organizations can play a fundamentally different role in response to a terrorist attack or so-called 'social' crises than the engagement of the Red Cross in response to forest fires. The role of traditional volunteer organizations (the expanding organizations in the Disaster Research Centre typology, cf. Dynes, 1994: 151) is well known in this respect, but Strandh emphasizes that extending and emergent organizations (type III and IV in Dynes' typology) are on the rise in response to crises and disasters, that they are highly heterogeneous and ill-understood. Meanwhile, in the Swedish case study of Strandh, the need for their inclusion increases when membership of traditional organizations is ageing and declining, and the social impact of crises is more likely to stem from future conflict situations and social unrest than only from forest fires and floods. A diversification of volunteer involvement in preparedness and response should therefore no longer be a peripheral concern (Strandh, 2019).

Next, Monika Rydstedt Nyman (2019) looks into collective learning in public organizations dealing with crises. She studies the barriers and opportunities for organizational learning from infrastructure accidents due to climate change-induced extreme weather events. The latter are likely occur regularly, yet the involved public organizations do not provide an incentives structure for double-loop learning (i.e. learning in order to not just repair, but avoid or respond better to the next event). Double loop processes imply that errors and anomalies are reported and that solutions to overcome these in future situations feed forward into the organization, resulting in change in cognition and behavior. The study reports that technical solutions (fixes or repairs) are favored over more cognitive, organizational learning, and that experience in prior crises on how to improve the swift deployment of resources and involve other organizations in the response did

not translate into organizational learning and organizational changes. Local respondents feel unsupported by strategic management levels to establish learning loops to collectively deal with crisis situations in new and improved ways. The study shows how interaction between stakeholders positively contributes to their knowledge on the crises and the response options, but that challenges remain to adopt these lessons in a shared organizational knowledge base and changed organizational behavior (Rydstedt-Nyman, 2019).

Last, John Van Trijp (2019) et al discern six crisis types and relate these to organizational resilience, defined as 'learning to improve itself by withstanding, surviving and adapting to crisis demands' (Van Trijp, Boersma, Van Trijp, & Groenewegen, 2019: 3). They employ a survey to study the organizational resilience of twenty-five Dutch safety regions (multi-disciplinary emergency preparedness and response organizations at the regional level in the Netherlands) in relation to hazards and crises in their service area. Surprisingly, they find no difference between the crisis types in how they affect resilience. They find that the quality of communication during, before and after a crisis between stakeholders internally and externally to these safety regions is a key ingredient for successful crisis mitigation and cooperation. Also, they find that volunteer firefighters evaluate the resilience of their safety region significantly lower than their colleagues with an employment contract at the fire services. This lower score on resilience in the surveys may result from a lower engagement of volunteers with the organization and an increase of bureaucratic procedures and top-down quality management that particularly volunteer fire fighters experience as an organizational constraint (Van Trijp, 2019).

The contingency perspective tells us to look into patterns across cases and discern between different situations that require different forms of crisis management. The above contributions do just that. They provide valid insights beyond the cases studied. First of all the studies reach beyond the event defined as a critical episode in time, as these insights pertain to preparedness and learning. Second of all, conclusions apply beyond the event as unique in terms of scope and space, as these insights transcend the particularities of the individual cases.

## References

- Dückers, M. L. A., C. J., Yzermans, W., Jong, and A., Boin. 2017. "Psychosocial Crisis Management: The Unexplored Intersection of Crisis Leadership and Psychosocial Support." *Risk Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy* 8 (2): 94–112.
- Dynes, Russell S. 1994. "Community Emergency Planning: False Assumptions and Inappropriate Analogies." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 12 (2): 141–58.
- Kalbassi, C., and P., Kauf. 2017. "Identifying Crisis Characteristics: Cross-Case Relevant Crisis Character Variables for Public Administrations." *Risk Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy* 8 (1): 68–90.
- Kenis, Patrick, Lianne, Schol, Marleen, Kraaij-Dirkzwager, and Aura, Timen. 2019. "Appropriate governance responses to infectious disease threats: developing working hypotheses." *Risk Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy* 10 (3): xx–x.