Transboundary Crises through the Eyes of Policymakers: Sense Making and Crisis Management

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If the world of crisis is changing, it is crucial to understand how policymakers perceive these new, transboundary threats. This article explores how policymakers made sense of such crises in 81 cases. The findings indicate that how much time urgency and surprise the policymakers perceived accompanied a transboundary threat helped to shape the nature of their decision-making process and how they managed the crisis. The data suggest that researchers and practitioners can gain an idea of how a crisis is likely to be managed by ascertaining how policymakers are viewing the triggering event.

1. Introduction

The world of crises and disasters is changing, as they become more transboundary in nature – that is, as they easily cross jurisdictions and borders. We are interested here in how the policymakers involved in dealing with these crises make sense of them. Do their initial perceptions of what is happening shape who becomes involved in dealing with the situation, the ways in which they define the event, and their decision-making processes? Much of our knowledge about crises and disasters grows out of in-depth case studies of particular incidents. Yet, with the advent of the web and internet and the increasing interconnectedness among places on the globe that facilitate the transboundary crisis, it has also become easier to collect information on how those engaged in crisis management perceive the situations that they face. The purpose of this paper is to explore how policymakers view this new type of crisis and to do so across a series of 81 such transboundary crises and disasters.

Although there is a growing consensus in the research literature that a crisis occurs when policymakers perceive a serious threat to the basic values of their organization or institution, time pressure to act, and have not anticipated the situation (Stern, 2003; Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Boin & Rhinard, 2008), usually these characteristics have been assigned to the policymakers by outside observers, for example, students of crises, the media, and/or opinion leaders. At issue is how those who have to manage the crisis view the situation and whether they view the event in the same way as these outside observes do. After all, crises are 'to a considerable extent what people make of' them and, in effect, 'in the eye of the beholder' (Boin et al., 2005, p. 138). Thus, it would seem worthwhile to examine the varying ways in which those involved in responding to so-called transboundary crises make sense of the triggering events and whether these definitions of the problem match how the extant literature defines a crisis.

2. Transboundary Crisis Management (TCM) dataset

The data we will examine were drawn from the TCM dataset located at the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. The TCM database grew out of a collaboration between the Moynihan Institute's Transboundary Crisis Management working group and the Crisis Management Research and Training Project (CRISMART) in the Swedish National Defence College. This collaboration

has involved faculty and graduate students from across the social sciences in the development of a crisis management case writing methodology and a coding scheme capable of translating 'thick description' cases into nominal and ordinal variables suitable for statistical analysis. The case writing methodology follows a pre-set analytical framework that highlights the role of variables identified as key in research on crisis management (see Stern & Sundelius, 2002; Hermann, Dayton, & Svedin, 2004). One set of these variables focuses on how those involved in dealing with the transboundary crisis have made sense of the event triggering the crisis. How threatening do they perceive the event to be to their organization's/institution's values and norms; how time urgent do they perceive the event to be; and did they anticipate the event or was it a surprise?[1]

Since 2004, the case writing methodology has been used at Syracuse University by social science graduate students enrolled in either a Masters capstone class or a regularly scheduled credit-bearing class on crisis management. To date, these students have produced over 100 cases dealing with a wide variety of transboundary crisis situations from terrorist incidents to transnational health pandemics to economic crises. The cases selected for study reflect transboundary crisis situations discussed in the literature and considered as such by informed observers. Examples of the cases that have been explored can be found in Table 1.

As the quality of these student-written, in-depth case studies can vary, quality control was maintained by having members of the TCM-working group review all cases and discard those that did not meet an initial threshold of quality either because information was not available for all variables, the case study was written in a superficial manner, the writer had difficulty ascertaining the crisis managers' perspectives on the crisis, or the writer did not address the presence or absence of all the variables in the case-writing manual. Roughly 30% of the total cases were discarded. In translating the case studies into data, each case study was read by a pair of trained coders who assigned values for each of the variables in the dataset. When members of these coding pairs disagreed about the value of a particular code, the TCM-working group was consulted in making a final decision on the appropriate value.

We will report on data from 81 cases. Among the 81 cases, in only four did the policymakers view the situation as other than high in threat; in effect, in 95% of the cases, they believed that the event threatened their core values, interests, or objectives. At least in 77 of these cases, when a transboundary crisis was considered as such by outside observers, it was also perceived by those involved as highly threatening to their organizations. Thus, in what follows, we will explore the 77 cases where threat was perceived as high. Although there were few differences among the cases in policymakers' perceptions of threat, there were definite differences among those involved in handling the cases in their perceptions of the time urgency in the situations as well as the degree to which what happened was anticipated. Table 1 indicates how the cases divided based on the policymakers' perceptions of the nature of the triggering event and presents some examples of cases that fall into each type of transboundary crisis situation.[2]

3. Sense making in transboundary crises

As the data in Table 1 indicate, one-fifth of the 77 cases were perceived to have the characteristics that match

Table 1. Perceptions of Triggering Event

Time urgency/ Degree of anticipation	Anticipated	Surprise	Total
Extended time	39 cases (50%) *Examples*: Raid on Ruby Ridge Thailand Currency Crisis in 1997 NATO Kosovo Crisis Disaster at Waco	16 cases (21%) *Examples*: Fall of Fujimori in Peru Y2K in Korea Baia Mare Disaster Gulf War Crisis of 1990	55 cases (71%)
Short time	7 cases (9%) *Examples*: Slovenian Independence Exxon Valdez Pastrana Attempted Peace Process with FARC Mayaquez Incident	15 cases (20%) *Examples*: DC Anthrax Attacks Madrid Bombing FAA and 9/11 Bhopal Chemical Spill	22 cases (29%)
Total	46 cases (60%)	31 cases (40%)	77 cases (100%)

Note: Some 33% of the 77 cases examined involve transboundary crises that occurred in Europe, 40% involve events in the United States, and 27% events in other parts of the world.

those of the definition of crisis extant in the literature, that is, were perceived to involve high threat, time urgency, and surprise. There was a sense among these policymakers that it was critically important to act before the situation got out of hand. Rather surprisingly, though, the majority (50%) of the cases were perceived to provide time for action and to have been anticipated. As the chief of staff to the Lithuanian prime minister and the head of disaster relief for a province in China observed to the authors in discussions of these data, this type of situation is 'what we see everyday; events like these fill our inbox and focus our day-to-day activity'. Another one-fifth of the cases were perceived as surprises but the policymakers believed that the events provided some time in which to make a decision before they thought the event would become transformed – the situations allowed for reflection before action. The least represented type of situation among the 77 cases were those that policymakers perceived as involving high threat and time urgency while at the same time they had anticipated the possibility of what was happening. For these policymakers, there was at least some semblance of a plan that could be put into play.

The data suggest that transboundary crises that are anticipated by policymakers are generally unlikely to also be viewed as time urgent. Indeed, the very fact that such an event has been anticipated may provide policymakers with some sense of comfort and, as a result, less need to act quickly. Interestingly, although the crisis literature stresses time urgency as critical to crisis decision making, only around one-third of the transboundary crises examined here were perceived as time urgent. For the most part, policymakers believed that there was time to act. The major difference in perceptions of the triggering event revolved around how anticipated the event was. Some 40% of the 77-transboundary crises were viewed as surprises; they caught the policymakers off guard and without a plan of action. And the 'surprises' were about equally divided into those perceived as being time urgent and those that were anticipated. Overall, the data suggest that policymakers do differentiate among the events that they perceive to trigger a transboundary crisis. Of interest are the effects on crisis management of these different ways of making sense of what is happening.

Early on in the study of crisis and crisis management, several researchers (Hermann, 1969, 1972; Holsti, 1972) proposed a typology of crisis situations based on the degree of threat, time, and anticipation perceived by those responsible for dealing with the situation. They argued that differences in perceptions of threat, time, and anticipation would lead to different decision-making strategies and ways of managing the crisis. Table 2 shows the decision-making processes they believed would result from the different ways of making sense of a transboundary crisis delineated

Table 2. Decision-Making Strategies Related to Perceptions of the Triggering Event

Time urgency/ Degree of anticipation	Anticipated	Surprise
Extended time	Deliberation (engage others)	Reflection (be innovative)
Short time	Reflex action (follow the plan)	Rapid reaction (reach closure quickly)

Note: All four situations are perceived to involve a high threat to core values.

above. Consider the following four scenarios that are suggestive of the processes proposed for these different ways of making sense of the triggering event.

President George W. Bush has been praised for his behaviour in response to the September 11 events and criticized for his behaviour with regard to Hurricane Katrina. And, yet, his actions in each of these transboundary crises matched his perceptions of what was happening. He perceived 9/11 as involving high threat, short time in which to respond, and surprise (Woodward, 2002). Indeed, the look on his face, captured on camera and broadcast around the world, when he was alerted to what was happening at the World Trade Center shows vividly his shock. Something had to be done and quickly to keep other such events from occurring; a rapid reaction was the order of the day. But with regard to Hurricane Katrina, it was not a surprise and, although highly threatening to New Orleans, Bush believed that he had put in place the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to handle just such emergencies. They would put their plans into action – or that was his belief until things began to deteriorate with the levees not holding in New Orleans, the Louisiana National Guard in Iraq and not around to mobilize, DHS having focused more funds and attention on the war on terror than on dealing with disasters, and assistance not arriving in a timely fashion (Brinkley, 2006). For Bush, Hurricane Katrina was a threat and time urgent, but it had been anticipated and plans were in place for action – it should merely have involved a reflex action.

Now let us consider events triggering transboundary crises where policymakers perceived that they had some time in which to respond but in one the event was unexpected while the other was anticipated – the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the NATO Kosovo crisis, for example. The Iraqi invasion was a surprise to American policymakers; the NATO Kosovo crisis arose after the NATO allies had threatened to act if Milosevic did not stop the 'genocide' in Kosovo. In the first, although President George H.W. Bush and his advisors were surprised, they perceived that they could buy themselves some time in which to develop an

appropriate response (Preston, 2001; Mitchell, 2005). They used the time that they believed they could manufacture with the help of the Saudis to build an international coalition, to gather the needed troops in the Gulf region, and to raise the monies necessary to pay for the First Gulf War that followed. Triggering events that are viewed as surprises but provide some time for response often allow for a more 'reflective' response – the situation is threatening and a surprise enough to bring in the top leadership but there is some time to search for, raise, and consider a range of alternatives for dealing with the event. But because the top leadership is involved almost immediately, they can pick and choose who else is brought into the process. In the NATO Kosovo crisis, although the situation was threatening, policymakers believed that there was time for planning and some planning that had been carried out (Clark, 2001). In such situations, it is hard to bypass the various stakeholder groups and constituencies that believe they should be involved in the decision-making process. Coordination generally becomes an issue. Moreover, the media often play an agenda-setting role in such situations, defining the nature of what is happening and

taking it out of the policymakers' control. As General Wesley Clark observed, NATO policy regarding Kosovo became policymaking by committee – there was often more deliberation than action.

Of interest is whether or not we find the strategies postulated in Table 2 and these scenarios linked with the policymakers' perceptions in the 77-transboundary crisis cases that are currently part of the TCM dataset. Table 3 reports data attempting to answer this question. It contains data on the kinds of decision-making processes that policymakers engaged in who found themselves in these four types of situations. These variables also come from the TCM dataset. Each of the results linking a process to the fourfold typology of transboundary crises reported in Table 3 is significant with a probability of .10 or less using a χ^2 test.

4. Sense making and crisis management

4.1. Dramatic triggering event

The data in Table 3 suggest that more than two-thirds of the policymakers who found themselves in threatening

Table 3. Crisis Management Strategies Associated with Perceptions of Triggering Event

Time urgency/ Degree of anticipation	Anticipated	Surprise
Extended time	Deliberation 39 cases (50%) *Findings*: 35% view triggering event as dramatic 46% contraction of authority 73% uncertain on crisis definition 73% uncertain on how to resolve crisis 71% med/hi jurisdictional complexity 83% dominant frame 65% develop options 18% path dependence 61% credibility with public 48% loyalty to in-group 83% med/hi value complexity 53% groupthink	Reflection 16 cases (21%) *Findings*: 74% view triggering event as dramatic 67% contraction of authority 65% uncertain on crisis definition 90% uncertain on how to resolve crisis 65% med/hi jurisdictional complexity 75% dominant frame 83% develop options 33% path dependence 44% credibility with public 62% loyalty to in-group 65% med/hi value complexity 33% groupthink
Short time	Reflex action 7 cases (9%) *Findings*: 67% view triggering event as dramatic 67% contraction of authority 62% uncertain on crisis definition 62% uncertain on how to resolve crisis 46% med/hi jurisdictional complexity 92% dominant frame 45% develop options 12% path dependence 57% credibility with public 56% loyalty to in-group 100% med/hi value complexity 17% groupthink	Rapid reaction 15 cases (20%) *Findings*: 83% view triggering event as dramatic 61% contraction of authority 47% uncertain on crisis definition 53% uncertain on how to resolve crisis 47% med/hi jurisdictional complexity 100% dominant frame 71% develop options 71% path dependence 89% credibility with public 60% loyalty to in-group 62% med/hi value complexity 50% groupthink

situations that they perceived to be time urgent and/or a surprise viewed the triggering event as dramatic. But only 35% of those in so-called deliberation situations – anticipated with extended time to respond – saw the triggering event in this way. The latter type of situation was 'business as usual' whereas as soon as there was a perception that the event was time urgent and/or a surprise, it became more dramatic and meaningful to the policymakers. The data indicate that those situations fitting the consensus definition of crisis – high threat, time urgent, and a surprise – were, indeed, viewed as the most dramatic of those studied at 83%. Surprise, however, may be the important element here in designating an event as dramatic because close behind these events were the situations perceived to permit some time for contemplation but that were not anticipated. Knowing that policymakers view an event as dramatic may be an indirect indicator that they perceive the situation as a surprise or, at the very least, as time urgent; it is something to which they must pay attention.

4.2. Contraction of authority

There is a debate in the literature regarding whether or not authority becomes centralized during a crisis. The literature on political leadership suggests that crises lead to a contraction of authority (e.g., George, 1980; 't Hart, 1994; Hermann & Kegley, 1995; Preston & Hermann, 2003) where decision making becomes centralized around those most responsible for dealing with such issues. Those who are ultimately responsible for the decision dominate the choice process. And, this literature argues, as power concentrates in the hands of the leaders and their close advisers, decisions are less likely to be affected by bureaucratic compromise or by the preferences of mass publics and special interests except as these are important to the leaders. Research in the public administration domain argues for 'intelligent decentralization' (Boin et al., 2005, p. 145; see also Stern & Verbeek, 1998; 't Hart & Preston, 1999), noting that generally there is more than one part of a governance structure involved in a crisis situation and that delegation of responsibility is often necessary in any response.

Examination of the data in Table 3 suggests that both arguments have some validity depending on how the policymakers have made sense of the triggering event. Roughly two-thirds of the transboundary crisis situations viewed by policymakers as time urgent led almost immediately to a contraction of authority to the top leadership – to those most accountable and with the most authority in the organization. The same was the case for those situations viewed as a surprise even if they allowed time for reflection. But decentralization

was the name of the game for those situations that were anticipated and perceived as providing some time for response. In fact, in 60% of these situations, policymakers engaged in decentralization rather than centralization of authority and the inclusion of a range of people, groups, and organizations. Some 62% of the policymaking in these events was performed by groups and coalitions. The data suggest that whether or not a crisis leads to a contraction of authority upward or a devolution of authority throughout the organization may depend on how the situation is perceived by those in charge. In effect, we note that policymakers engage in both phenomena depending on how they define the nature of the crisis.

4.3. Degree of uncertainty

Uncertainty has at times been substituted for the element of surprise in the definition of crisis. Consider the following (Boin et al., 2005, p. 3; see also Stern & Sundelius, 2002; Stern, 2003):

> In a crisis, the perception of threat is accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty pertains both to the nature and the potential consequences of the threat: what is happening and how did it happen? ... More importantly, uncertainty clouds the search for solutions: what can we do?

In examining the data in Table 3, we find that uncertainty regarding the nature of the transboundary crisis that policymakers believe they are facing and what can be done about it differs by their perceptions of the nature of the situation. Let us also add in here 'degree of jurisdictional complexity', which is a measure of uncertainty with respect to who is in charge of dealing with the crisis; it, too, differs by perception of the characteristics of the situation one is facing.

In roughly three-quarters of the crises that were anticipated as well as viewed as providing time for action – the deliberation situations – there was debate over the nature of the situation, just how to deal with the event, and who should be in charge. These are the same situations where policymakers tended to decentralize the decision-making process and participate in groups and coalitions in making policy. The question can be raised: are these events not dramatic enough to make contraction of authority feasible or are such events destined, because they, in fact, do involve a number of different organizations and institutions, to be viewed as belonging to no one and, thus, both the definition of what is happening and the designation of who is in charge remain uncertain? By way of contrast, those situations perceived as both a surprise and time urgent – those matching best the definition of crisis in

the literature – were viewed with more certainty with regard to definition, what to do, and who was in charge. The perception that there is short time in which to respond and that the event is a surprise appears to lead policymakers to assume they know what is going on – or that they should know what is happening as 'time is wasting' – and to 'circle the wagons', moving quickly to work on a response.

Perhaps the most interesting result with regard to uncertainty is that for situations where policymakers perceive there is time to consider and respond to what is happening but they were surprised. Some 90% of these policymakers were uncertain about how to respond to the event. This high feeling of uncertainty about what to do may be one reason why these situations tend to be dominated by the leader most accountable for the outcome – 62% for these situations versus around 40% for the other situations. Others (e.g., Hermann, 1969, 1972; Hermann & Sakiev, 2006) have observed that these situations often lead to innovative solutions to problems. Some have argued that the US Marshall Plan was developed in response to just such a crisis – when Britain notified the Truman administration in February 1947 that it could no longer supply aid to Greece and Turkey due to the deteriorating economic and political situation in Western Europe (Jones, 1964). Supporting this interpretation are the findings that indicate policymakers perceiving themselves to be in such situations are the least likely to arrive quickly at a dominant frame and most likely to develop options.

4.4. Information management

In examining information management, we are interested in how the policymakers handling these various types of situations managed information with regard to the framing of the situation, the options that were proposed, the effects of previous decisions, and credibility with the public. Previous literature on crisis decision making (e.g., Hermann, 1972; Holsti, 1972; Parker & Stern, 1999; Stern, 1999; Stern & Sundelius, 2002) has indicated that policymakers tend to move quickly to a dominant frame that is difficult to change over time, that they are more likely to focus in on one or two options rather than to explore a range of possible alternatives, that they are likely to engage in path-dependent behaviour with each decision following from previous ones, and that they are likely to become involved in a number of credibility traps that limit their effectiveness with the media and public.

With regard to 9/11, there were several ways of framing what had just occurred but 'attack on America' came easily to mind from the pictures of the planes going into US buildings and the image stuck. In reference to Hurricane Katrina, there were a variety of ways to conceive of evacuating the city of New Orleans but the plan said we should do it in a particular way, that is, by car. As these examples suggest, in 100% of the situations perceived to involve short time and surprise – those most like what we observers consider to be a crisis – there was a dominant frame; in the situations where time was thought to be of the essence but the event was anticipated, the figure was 92%. With more time perceived to be available, there is more opportunity to search for information and the viewpoints of other than the leadership begin to play a role. In fact, in the situations that are surprises but perceived to allow some time in which to respond – where reflection is possible – there was openness to new ideas as noted in the willingness at 83% to develop and consider multiple options. It may be that in such instances individuals who had not been able to muster support for particular programmes and options relevant to the present event in the past gain a chance to peddle them once more because the policymakers, without a plan but time to explore, are more open than before.

An intriguing result occurs for policymakers seeing themselves in a time urgent situation but one that has been anticipated. In fact, the term 'reflex action' attributed to the decision making in this type of situation in Table 2 is born out by the finding that these particular policymakers are the least likely to develop options; indeed, they are almost 20% less likely than the other sets of policymakers to consider other than the dominant frame. They are in a time urgent situation that is highly threatening and they have anticipated what needs to be done. They are going to act on the basis of the plan – at least initially.

Policymakers who perceive short time and have been caught by surprise are the most path dependent. Even though they do develop options, these alternatives grow out of decisions that have been taken before. But in this process, they are afforded the greatest credibility with the public; in some 89% of these situations, the policymakers were viewed as having such credibility. When confronted with events like the Madrid bombing, 9/11, and the Bhopal chemical spill, which required a quick response and none had contemplated what actually happened, the public appears to need to believe in the policymakers whom they have entrusted with leadership. Such leaders may also need to take comfort in what has worked or not worked before and, thus, the path dependence. It is almost as if the public is giving their leaders the benefit of the doubt and the leaders are relying on their experience to pull themselves through. The image of the elder President Bush patting his son after the latter finished his speech to the nation in the National Cathedral after 9/11 may suggest the dynamic here. A grateful nation is holding its

breath as its leaders divulge what they are going to do and the leaders, in turn, are depending on their interpretations of history as their guide.

Once again, the data regarding the policymakers viewing themselves caught up in surprise situations but where they also perceived there was some time in which to respond raise questions. These policymakers are neither likely to act in a path-dependent manner nor are they given much credibility by the public. Their lack of certainty regarding what to do along with their focus on the development of options and their relative unwillingness to focus on a dominant frame may confuse the public, leaving it with no sense of direction or clear understanding concerning what is happening. And their contraction of authority, while allowing the leaders to pick and choose whom to include in the decision-making process, may divorce them from the public and the media as they move to deal with the problem facing them.

4.5. Group dynamics

There is an extensive literature examining group dynamics in crisis situations (e.g., Janis, 1989; 't Hart, 1994; 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 1997; Hermann, Stein, Sundelius, & Walker, 2001; Garrison, 2003; Kaarbo, 2008). Indeed, the notion of groupthink – one among many such group dynamics concepts – developed as a result of an examination of crises facing the United States that Irving Janis (1972) viewed were crisis management fiascoes. Although researchers have found it difficult to validate all of Janis' contentions for the groupthink concept, it has been picked up by policymakers and the media to cover the following kind of group. Groupthink is often associated with loyalty to a group and the desire to remain a part of that group under all circumstances – often because of its prestige and leadership, its ability to affect change, or clan/tribal/ethnic/educational ties. Groupthink facilitates contraction of authority and the focus on a particular way of defining the situation as well as dealing with it. Generally, opposition is not condoned and value complexity is not necessarily taken into account.

The literature talks about there being at least two types of groupthink ('t Hart, 1994; 't Hart et al., 1997; Hermann et al., 2001); vertical and horizontal. Vertical groupthink results when a group has a dominant leader who lets his or her positions be known, in turn directing the decision-making process. Horizontal groupthink occurs in cohesive groups, often composed of equals who all want to be part of the process or have some reason to be part of the process based on position, cause, ideology, or background. Interestingly, both these types of groupthink can be found in the data in Table 3. The vertical type is found in situations where policymakers perceive time urgency and surprise and have engaged in a contraction of authority. Horizontal groupthink appears to occur in situations that policymakers perceive as threatening but where there is time in which to respond and some degree of anticipation of what is happening. These are the groups that tend to be more decentralized, involve more parties, and have the highest percentage of medium- to high-value complexity.

Whereas transboundary crisis situations perceived as surprises seem to lead to greater loyalty to the in-group – perhaps a result of the contraction of authority, having anticipated what could happen appears to result in value complexity and, in turn, less loyalty to the in-group. Having anticipated an event means that a variety of stakeholders/constituents may also have an opinion about the appropriate tradeoffs in which the policymakers should engage and may want to be included in the decision-making process. The situations that policymakers perceive to be time urgent but anticipated – those calling for a reflex action – are a good example of this one-two punch. All these situations (100%) were characterized by medium- to high-value complexity and in only slightly over half was there loyalty to the in-group. Interestingly, the two types of situations that policymakers had anticipated could happen, regardless of the time to respond – those involving deliberation and reflex action – were those where they were most likely to engage in the 'blame game' (40% and 50%, respectively) and to judge that they had not been very successful in their decision making (64% and 55%, respectively). Policymakers perceiving themselves in what has been called a 'real' crisis (one with high threat, time urgency, and surprise) participated in the 'blame game' less than policymakers in any of the other situations (18%) and viewed their decisions as moderately or highly successful (53%).

These results regarding group dynamics suggest that the policymakers in the time urgent, surprise situations are involved in a rather closed type of decision making with a tight inner circle of people who believe similarly and who are intent on taking charge and doing what needs to be done. Policymakers who find themselves in the other three types of transboundary crisis situations must pay more attention to what is going on around them, either because in the deliberation situation (extended time, anticipated) there are multiple values at stake and others interested in having a role, in the reflex-action situation (short time, anticipated) there are plans that must be modified and adjusted by experts to fit the situation, or in the reflection situation (extended time, surprise) there is little sense of what can be done and interest in new and innovative ideas. Policymakers appear to match their group dynamics to the way they perceive the event in which they find themselves.

5. Conclusions

This discussion represents an initial analysis of the 81 cases currently in the TCM dataset but does suggest that the situations we often 'lump together' as crises may, in fact, differ both in how they are perceived by the policymakers involved and in the nature of the decision process. Indeed, the various decision processes postulated in the early literature on crisis management indicated in Table 2 were supported in the data. We have examined here the perceptions of the decision makers who first defined the crisis – who, in effect, made sense of the triggering event. These perceptions can, of course, change across the course of an event as policymakers engage in a sequence of decisions. And, indeed, the data presented here suggest that there will probably be differences in how easy it is to change these perceptions. Those decision makers who perceive themselves faced with a situation that is defined as having short time in which to respond and as a surprise – the rapid reaction situation – seem more likely than others to get 'locked' into a particular way of responding and less likely to perceive that they could have made a mistake. With a high degree of cohesion in the decision unit, more certainty about what needs to be done, and a sense of success with what was tried, it may be difficult for negative feedback to penetrate this decision unit and facilitate a change in perceptions. Whereas those involved in situations that were both anticipated and are viewed as allowing for time for a response (the deliberation situations) may be constantly changing their views about what is happening as the nature of the decision unit changes and there is a growing sense of frustration or, at the least, uncertainty about just what is the best course of action and who should be carrying it out.

In point of fact, each of the types of situations has its advantages and disadvantages when it comes to shaping crisis management. While policymakers perceiving themselves in a short time, surprise (rapid reaction) situation tend to lock in the decision unit and prevent it from getting much outside information, they also come to a decision quickly, maintain credibility with the public, and exude a sense that 'there is a solution to the problem and we can solve it'. Because they are viewed as a surprise but as providing time for a thought-out response, the so-called reflection situations appear to generate the desire in policymakers to be innovative in responding to what is occurring even though in the process stakeholders, constituents, and other leaders may be unsure of what is happening and begin to define the situation themselves. At issue in this type of situation is whether one Marshall Plan is worth the perceived lack of action on the part of the media and/or a highly frustrated public? Situations that are perceived as time urgent but as also providing policymakers with a plan or a set of standard operating procedures lead to reflex actions in which the leadership is quick to implement the said plan without much consideration of whether or not this situation matches that for which it was developed. But it is important to note that there appear to be very few of these reflex action transboundary crises if the percentage of such cases in our sample is any indication.

The situations that are perceived to involve a high threat but leave time to respond and are generally anticipated (the deliberation situations) appear almost antithetical to the other three types of situations in our dataset and may represent what has become fairly routine 'business as usual' for leaders in high-stress occupations. It is policymakers' behaviour in these events that is often discussed in the literature focused on first responders (e.g., Stern & Sundelius, 2002; Boin et al., 2005). And, it is in these events that policymakers decentralize authority, get caught in jurisdictional and value complexities, and have trouble both defining the nature of the problem as well as who should be in charge but also remain open to grassroots input and participation.

The data in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that we need to be careful in labelling an event a crisis without taking into account how those involved in dealing with it are making sense of what is happening; indeed, we can gain some idea of what the decision-making process will look like by ascertaining how policymakers are viewing the triggering event. Having us as outside observers 'make sense' of how the policymakers are viewing the situation may be a first step to understanding what is likely to happen and to helping leaders learn how their perceptions can influence the way that they manage a crisis. But because crises are interpreted by people, it is critical that we take their perceptions into account so that we avoid expecting a certain kind of behaviour when policymakers are not experiencing the situation as we believe it to be.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The case writing manual and the codebook used in the project are available from the authors.

2. Although each of these three ways of characterizing the triggering event could form a continuum, policymakers tend to perceive threat, time, and degree of anticipation in a more nominal or ordinal fashion, that is, as being present or absent or containing more or less of the characteristic (Heuer, 1999).

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