Crisis Resilience and Communication in Organizations

“Formally, resilience is the “capability of a system to maintain its function and structure in the face of internal and external changes and to degrade gracefully when it must,” Resilience occurs when the system continues to operate despite failures in some of its parts.”
(Weick & Sutcliff, 2007: 69)

A significant part of modern crises management and crisis communication research is based on a normative research tradition aiming at anticipating future crises and developing crisis management plans that fit the scenarios (cf. Johansen & Frandsen, 2007; Coombs, 2007). In recognition of the limitations of this approach and the organizations’ inability to foresee all potential crises in a world of constant change, the concept of resilience has gained considerable ground in crisis studies (cf. Weick & Sutcliff, 2007; Somers, 2009). Nevertheless, in the literature, resilience is often taken for granted as a distinct characteristic of the organizational system which can be activated and used whenever necessary, with little reflection on how it got there in the first place.

The purpose of this paper is to examine 1) the understanding of resilience that characterizes crisis management and communication research anno 2012; and 2) how organizational resilience can be created and what role communication play in creating organizational resilience.

The study is conducted as a literature review of 41 peer-reviewed journal articles from various scientific disciplines. Initially, the title and the abstract of the journal articles were subject to a content analysis based on predefined categories. Following the content analysis some articles were selected for further analysis and discussion, to provide theoretical insight into how resilience stems from communication. The keywords for the reviewed journals were crisis and resilience, as crisis is a phenomenon where the resilience of an organization becomes visible.

Preliminary results indicate four different conceptualizations of resilience. These conceptualizations seem to be rooted in an understanding of resilience as being dependent on: a) individual characteristics/traits (Rutter, 1985), b) as being relational or situational (Walsh, 1996; Powley, 2009), c) as being embedded in a social system (Somers, 2009) and d) as a result of planning and designing processes (Jüttner & Maklan, 2011). The four conceptualizations of the phenomenon can be categorized based on whether resilience is perceived as being actor or system dependent and whether resilience is perceived as a feature or function, whereby a model can be established. The different conceptualization of resilience can be associated with different views of communication, thus communication is present in all four conceptions of resilience. Particularly in the actor perspective, communication takes a prominent role as a creative element of resilience. The paper will elaborate on these initial results.

The typology developed proves useful for understanding the different ideas of resilience. In addition, the typology also indicates the different epistemological perspectives from each contribution, whereby it becomes possible to theorize about how resilience is created in an organizational context on the basis of the different understandings.
Literature


