Resilience, sensemaking and internal crisis communication

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1 Introduction

“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 and strategies that fit these scenarios (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007; Coombs, 2007; Powley, 2009). In recognition of the limitations of such an approach and the organizations’ inability to foresee all potential crises in a world of constant change, the concept of resilience is beginning to gain ground in crisis studies (cf. Weick & Sutcliff, 2007; Somers, 2009; Cunha et al., 2013).

This increased interest in the phenomenon of resilience, can be traced back to a discussion initiated by social scientist Aron Wildavsky (1988) concerning whether risk is best handled proactively by planning in relation to anticipated future risk, or whether to rely on the reactive abilities of a unit after the risk has manifested itself. This discussion has not lost its actuality in light of the crisis rhetoric that follows the global financial crisis and in scientific literature it is a continued discussion as to how crises are best managed in and how resilience aides this process (cf. Weick & Sutcliff, 2007; Powley, 2009; Cunha et al., 2013).

However, despite the growing interest in the phenomenon there does not seem to exist an commonly agreed definition of the phenomenon resilience. This can perhaps be ascribed to the fact that resilience operates at very different levels and in some instances are understood as a feature of an actor or a system and in other instances is understood as a function of different processes (Simonsen, forthcoming; Sutcliff & Vogus, 2013). In the crisis management and crisis communication, resilience are often taken for granted as a distinct characteristic of a unit or a system, which can be activated and used whenever necessary, with little reflection on how it got there in the first place (Somers, 2009; Powley, 2009). In the various theorizing’s of the resilience phenomenon, several indications exist that communication may have a
significant relevance to the phenomenon. For example interactions, relationships and role systems are highlighted as potential constituents of the phenomenon of resilience (Weick, 1993; Sutcliff & Vogus, 2013; Chuna et al., 2013).

Anchored in the above reflections this thesis aims to answer the two research questions:

1) What are the different conceptualizations of the resilience phenomenon?
2) How can communication contribute to the ongoing process of creating organizational resilience?

2 Theoretical frameworks

The theoretical framework of this thesis can be divided into three different areas of theory, and all of these areas of theory can be argued to be compatible with the social phenomenological philosophy of sciences that serve as optic for creation of knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation (Schutz, 2005; Berger & Luckmann, 2005). The three areas of theory are 1) Crisis Sensemaking (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1993; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), 2) Organizational Communication (Putnam & Pacaknowsky, 1988; Ashcraft et al., 2009) and 3) Organizational Resilience (Weick, 1993; Sutcliff & Vogus, 2003; Cunha, 2013). The different areas of theory will be introduced below.

2.1 Crisis Sensemaking

The thesis draws inspiration from the Crisis Sensemaking tradition, which is a tradition within crisis and change research that emphasizes the sense-making aspect of crisis and change-processes (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Pearson & Clair, 1998). In this tradition Karl E. Weick (1969; 1979) theory of retrospective sense-making and organizing takes a central position. A central argument in the theory of retrospective sensemaking is, that the driving force behind every social organization is to reduce equivocality and complexity. As stated below

“Organizing consists of the resolving of equivocality in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behaviors embedded in conditionally related processes”
(Weick, 1969: 91)

Thus the starting point of social organization is to reduce equivocality by maintaining or developing processes that are continuous and create behavior that can be expected to be mutual between two or more individuals in the processing of information from the specific situation in which a given social organization is situated (Weick, 1969: 91). The sequence of retrospective sensemaking can be describes as such, organization’s members - consciously or unconsciously - selectively chooses different cues from the
surroundings that they act upon in a given situation. Based on the outcome of the act and the subsequent inter-subjective negotiation of meaning, existing meaning structures are maintained or changed. This retained or new structure of meaning affects which cues are acted upon in future situations. Thus the theory of retrospective sensemaking explains how organizations socially construct their reality and by being aware about the process of sensemaking, organizations can prevent crisis before they turn into crisis or act mindfully in crisis (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1993).

The different studies conducted within the Crisis Sensemaking tradition are inspired by the theory of sensemaking described above (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The studies within the tradition are mainly characterized by qualitative casestudies, and the different studies can be divided into two streams of research 1) how organizational members sensemaking processes unfolds at a micro level in different crisis context, and 2) how sensemaking takes place, at a macro level at the end of crisis (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). This thesis is positioned within the first stream of research and is inspired by the Crisis Sensemaking tradition in general, but is in particular inspired by the notion of a crisis as a cosmology episode (Weick, 1993). The cosmology episode I defined as stated below:

“A cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together.”

(Weick, 1993: 633)

As it is evident in the above quotation, a cosmological episode is related to the sensemaking and organizing processes - and thus to communication as it will be elaborated later (Ashcraft et al. 2009). The cosmology episode can said to represent a paradox, since it not only represents a loss of meaning, but also a situation in which the resources needed to restore sense disappears altogether (Weick, 1993). The resources referred to in the above quote, are the organizational resources that provide a contextual rationality and predictability in the life world of individuals and they exist in the inter-subjective space in shape of e.g a social role system, the basic assumptions an organization operates by or the various capacities of organizational members (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1993). Thus in the situation where an organization experiences a cosmological episode, communication can be said to be quite essential in order to maintain the organizational resources and to hinder that an organization dissolves when faced with a complex and ambiguous situation (Weick, 1993; Weick et al., 2005).
2.2 Organizational Communication

The thesis is situated within the field of Organizational Communication (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983; Putnam & Cheney, 1985), more specifically in the growing literature of Organizational Communication, which argues that an organization is a communicative achievement – the so called Communication Constituted Organization principles (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Ashcraft et al., 2009).

Within literature on communications constitution of organization, different theoretical three streams have developed, namely the four-flows model that are inspired by structuration-theory (McPhee & Zaug, 2000; McPhee & Iverson, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), the Montreal-school that are inspired by linguistics and organizing theory (Taylor et al., 1996; Robichaud & Cooren, 2013) and finally the newly established system theoretical school that is inspired by Luhmanns theory of social systems (Schoeneborn, 2011). It is within the first two schools of thought that this thesis is inspired in the conceptualization of the communication phenomenon. Arguing on a macro level that an organization is constituted by different flows of communication (McPhee & Zaug, 2000; McPhee & Iverson, 2009) and these flows are consist of text – conversation and conversation – text dialects (Taylor et al., 1996; Robichaud & Cooren, 2013) communication is understood as described below:

“Communication is the ongoing, dynamic, interactive process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings, which are axial—not peripheral—to organizational existence and organizing phenomena.”

(Ashcraft et al., 2009: 22)

With such an understanding of communication in mind, it is argued that the flow called activity-coordination is particular interesting in relation to the phenomenon of resilience, because it is communication about activity-coordination that are evident and become prominent in ambiguous situations as a crisis (McPhee & Zaug, 2000; McPhee & Iverson, 2009). Nevertheless, activity-coordination in difficult in ambiguous situations that are unknown and call for sensemaking and organizing processes (Weick, 1969; Weick, 1979). That is why activity-coordination is best conceptualized as ongoing dialects between conversation and text (Taylor et al., 1996; McPhee & Iverson, 2013). It is also in this dialectical and circular process that materiality regaining a certain topicality, because materiality is integrated in both conversation and text, which is the site of organizing (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Robichaud & Cooren, 2013).

Based upon the notion that sensemaking is a communicative phenomenon existing in individuals’ interaction with their life-world consisting of numerous subject-subject or subject-object relation,
communication is per definition always situated in a physical and social practice (Lave & Wenger, 2001; Schutz, 2005). Thus are there different physical and interpretation resources available in different contexts, and theses interpretation resources are relevant to include in the understanding of how communication constitutes sense that is central to the organizing phenomenon (Deetz, 2001; Ashcraft et al., 2009).

2.3 Organizational Resilience

As earlier mentioned the phenomenon of resilience in the social sciences can be traced back to a discussion initiated by Aaron Wildavsky (1988) concerning whether risk is best handled proactively by anticipating and planning in relation to potential risks, or whether to rely on a units reactive abilities after a risk has manifested itself. This discussion is questioning whether resilience or anticipation is the preferred strategy and the concluding remarks that Wildawsky reaches, is anchored in the different risk assessments associated with both strategies and the very nature of a risk. In risk management Wildavsky recommends a split-strategy, and argue that one should try to anticipate future risks, but also build up resilience capabilities because the anticipated risk is rarely the one which is the biggest challenge. On the contrary is it the unexpected risk that posed the greatest threat and in managing unexpected risks, resilience is the preferred strategy.

Nevertheless the interest in resilience has transcended risk management literature and has also become a topic in the research fields of positive psychology (Sutcliff & Vogus, 2004) and crisis management (Weick & Sutscliff, 2007). In this line of research resilience is: “refers to the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions” (Sutcliff & Vogus, 2004: 95) which is also evident in the quotation in the introduction to this paper. As mentioned in the introduction, different understandings of the phenomenon of resilience exist in the scientific literature. In some case is resilience threatend as a distinct characteristic of a given unit and yet in other cases it is argued that resilience is seen as a function of different processes (Simonsen, forthcoming). In this thesis resilience is understood as a social process between members of an organization, who functions in rapidly changing environments with low predictability and who faces event characterized by equivocality and complexity (Johnson & Johnson, 2007). That is organizations that function under conditions that make the cosmology episode a very likely and real threat, with a subsequent disintegration of the organization as a result (Weick, 1993). This idea of resilience as the contradiction to a cosmological episode raises different questions relevant for future research. First, it is interesting to explore the paradox that exists in the collapses of sense and the fact that the resources to rebuild this sense are not present. Does this mean that organizations experiencing a cosmology episode will always dissolve or does possibilities for action exist? If action is a possibility, what characterizes such an action?
Given the fact that meaning has collapsed, any action could potentially be characterized as an improvised act since the effect of the action for the individual will not be possible to foresee or calculate, because the world is not perceived as a rational orderly system for the individual. An improvised action may in this respect be understood as an individuals' ability to act in uncertainty, but with knowledge and experience repertoires as ballast (Rerup, 2001). That is to say, that in a situation where sense have collapsed, then resilience can consist in the action and enactment of the environment. The initiating questions in continuation of this must therefore be whether the improvised action can facilitate the resources needed in relation to once again rebuild the sense in the cosmological episode. The theory of sensemaking indicates such a possibility (Weick, 1969; Weick, 1979; Weick, 1988; Weick, 1993).

The above sections outline the thesis theoretical framework and introduce in short the three areas of theoretical inspiration that works as a framework for the thesis, namely 1) Crisis Sensemaking, 2) Organizational Communication and 3) Organizational Resilience. The next section will present the thesis methodological considerations, study design and research techniques.

3 Methodology
The empirical study is designed according to the framework of a phenomenological study (Sanders, 1982). By constructing a methodology that complies with the criteria for phenomenological research, coherence between the ontological position of and the epistemology are secured (Grix, 2002). The empirical phenomenological research is characterized by two different streams, for example van Manen (1982) and Moustakas’ (1994) hermeneutic phenomenology and then phenomenological psychology characterized by such authors as Colazzi (1978) and Giorgi (1983). In spite of the different streams can a phenomenological research design in general be said to consist of three different components of importance for the design of an empirical study. These three components are 1) the delimitation as to what and who should be field of research for an empirical study, 2) how the empirical data is to be generated and 3) the analytical treatment the empirical data will be subject to (Sanders, 1982). This section will elaborate on these three components.

3.1 Multiple casestudies and case description
In relation to the empirical studies first component, that is to delaminate as to what and who should be the starting point for an empirical study, is it important to have the research question of the thesis in mind. In this thesis the research question explicitly ask how communication can contribute to the ongoing process of creating resilience? Answering such a question calls for a study designs that as well as describes, tries to
understand, how sensemaking takes place in a specific context it cannot be delimit from (Neergaard, 2010). A case study allows such a research design, as formulated below:

“A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundary between phenomenon and context is not clearly evident.”

(Yin, 2009: 18)

Thus is the argument for the use of a case study as research design, that the phenomenon under investigation can be said to be complex and context dependent in that the phenomenon is related to a specific context where one or more individuals experience difficulties in how to make sense in a complex and equivocal situation (Johnson & Johnsen, 2007; Neergaard, 2010; Yin, 2009).

In practice, the empirical study is conducted as a multiple case study (Yin, 2009; Neergaard, 2010) where the empirical examples consist of two different military units, who trains for high reliability and functionality in order to perform the different tasks the Danish defense has in international operations. In literature it is argued that private and public organizations can learn from High Reliability Organizations, because such organizations in their structure and processes have built in high reliability because of their ability to carry out collective mindfulness (Weick & Sutcliff, 2007). As argued below:

“We will argue that HROs are important because they provide a window on a distinctive set of processes that foster effectiveness under trying conditions.”

(Weick et al., 1999: 81)

The two military training exercises that are used as cases in the study, differs as to intensity and content. The first case was build up around a military tactical scenario, while the other case was not. This also means that the other case somewhat gained the form of a team-building exercise. Nevertheless was the basic idea of both training exercises to stress the units by exposing them to physical pressure, mental pressure and a consistent lack of information about future events. Pressures that combined with equivocality and complexity of situations induced a phenomena comparable to a cosmology episode or sense-making crisis.

3.3 Research techniques

The next component, how the empirical data is to be generated related to the different research techniques applied. The research techniques applied differs in the two cases. In the first case called Jacks of Clubs, which is a training exercise for the military police build around a tactical scenario, observations
studies and in-depth research interviews were used. In the second case study called the Gandarm-drill, the research techniques applied were also observations and in-depth research interviews, but this time supplemented by recordings of group interaction in problem-solving and task performances.

Both cases had duration of one week and which groups there were followed during the one week was random sampled. In the case of Jacks of Clubs, the group followed consisted of five members randomly put together prior to the training exercise and all the group members were interviewed in the weeks following the exercise. The fixed group followed at the Gandarm-drill, consisted of eight group members, all of which was interviewed in the weeks following the training exercise.

The observations studies conducted in this study have had several purposes. First and foremost have the observation studies helped creating a “fusion-of-horizon” between the interviewer and the interviewee. This common understanding of situations and events has been of great importance for the quality of the subsequent in-depth research interviews (Clark & Fast, 2008). Furthermore have the observations allowed for a sampling of situations of interest for the phenomenon of resilience.

The argument for using in-depth research interviews is the ability of the semi-structured interview to address the sensemaking-process of the individuals, while still allowing the flexibility need to elaborate on understandings and explanations of specific situation (Bryman, 2004). Thus the purpose of the research interview is to understand themes in a situated practice from the perspective of the interviewee (Kvale, 2003).

The former section has given a brief description of the study design and the different research techniques applied in the study, furthermore the two cases are briefly described. The next section will describe thoughts and question as how to analyze the empirical material.

4.0 Thoughts of analysis?

The observation conducted in the study tends to take a position as background knowledge for the in-depth interviews. Although this constellation works well, it would be interesting to give these observations a more prominent position among the different empirical materials. However, how this is done remains an open question.
With regards to the 13 in-depth interviews, the initial idea is to analyze the phenomenon of resilience by using the empirical phenomenological analysis (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994). In line with other strategies of analyzing in-depth research interviews (cf. Kvale, 2003) is the empirical phenomenological analysis consistent of different steps like 1) making a transcription, 2) reading the transcription, 3) identify meaning-statements, 4) thematic categorization, 5) integrating meaning-statement in thematic categories and finally 6) developing a description of basis structure of phenomenon under study (Colaizzi, 1978). Hopefully such an approach can capture the complexity of the different situations, especially if it is combined and exemplified with descriptions of observations and examples from the group interactions.

Regarding the recordings of group interaction in problem-solving and task performances, there are at this point no initial idea as how to analyze this data, but compared to the interview material the recordings of group interactions are a minor part of the empirical material. Nevertheless a strategy for analysis is necessary and right now the idea is to self-develop a kind of cosmos versus chaos approach (Weick, 1985) to grasp this empirical material.

5.0 Concluding remarks and early findings

The theoretical foundation of the thesis is in place, and so are the methodological considerations and different research techniques, since the empirical study has been performed. The challenges ahead exists in what Barnet Glaser so rightfully has called “the drugless trip” (Glaser, 1978: 22-23) which describes the period of analyzing were the process is experienced as being both messy and confusing. It is the period before one reaches saturation, before one has strong empirical categories and a theoretical construct to explain them (Glaser & Strauss, 1969). However in this period of confusion, hunches and tendencies do exist and below is some of the initial observations from the empirical study:

1. In situations of uncertainty and complexity, people tend to lean against the formal organizational structure to decrease the complexity of negotiating roles and task assignments. This also implies that the management function becomes important in such situation.
   - This is evident when the manager tries to include them in decision-making – process
   - This is evident when they do not agree with the managers decision

2. In situation of uncertainty and complexity, communication about activity-coordination becomes salient. The missing ability to predict and anticipate the near future makes the text-conversation dialects a reasonable conceptualization of resilience in activity coordination.

3. There exist a flexible attitude in relation to plans and strategies, which is often exemplified by the saying: "A plan keeps up, until the first encounter with the enemy (translated from Danish)"
4. The different pressures combined with the experiences uncertainty, makes people go egocentric at some point. This is the crucial moments because when people go egocentric, the organizational structure is starting to disintegrate. However there are also indications of a revers model suggesting organization disintegration is the crucial point making people go egocentric.

5. The communication climate changes as the pressure on the people increases. Especially in situation with high ambiguity did the communication climate changed negatively.

6. As pressure increased people need more detailed information, served in short instructive messages.

7. Trust and people helping each other seems to be an essential part of function in VUCA environments (Johnsen & Johnsen, 2007).

8. In equivocal situation people enact their environment (Weick, 1988). However the near future and task performance is enacted too.

The different findings suggested in these initial observations from the empirical study are in general not that particular or special, for example the flexible attitude towards plans is a general characteristic of High Reliability Organizations (cf. Weick & Sutcliff, 2007) and that detailed information served in short instructive messages, can help in task performance (Weick, 1995), or that trust is important for organizations operating I VUCA environment’s is also known (Johnson & Johnson, 2007). Nevertheless some interesting observations do exist, in how individuals function in complex situation characterized by univocal cues and under time pressure, especially to understand how structure is organized through communications.

6 Literatures


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