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Exploring Internal Crisis Communication in Multicultural Environments:
A Study among Danish Managers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore managers' perspectives on and practices of internal crisis communication in multicultural environments.

Design/methodology/approach – After a review of relevant literature on crisis, culture and internal communication to define the framework and relevance of this study, results from qualitative interviews with Danish managers are presented.

Findings – Interviewees acknowledge the relevance of the cultural backgrounds of employees in relation to internal communication, especially in crisis situations. Cultural aspects affect message framing and employee sensemaking, especially when it comes to employees located in other countries. Line managers and local communicators are key in the adaptation of verbal and non-verbal communicative features. Employees are also seen as active sensegivers and communicators.

Research limitations/implications – Findings show how demographic and globalisation patterns, which are changing domestic and international workplaces, have important implications for internal communication and internal crisis communication. There is therefore a call for further research, especially from the perspective of employees.

Originality/value – Although cultural aspects have been highlighted as a recurrent feature of most crises today, and one of the new research areas to be explored, studies within this area are very few and concern mainly external audiences and practices. The present research study contributes to this overlooked area by offering valuable insights into internal crisis communication in organisations with a multicultural environment.

Keywords –Multiculturalism, Globalization, Employee communications, Internal crisis communication, Crisis communication, Communication adaptation

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Much research deals with the recognition of new challenges related to multiculturalism in society and the changing nature of work and the workforce. Such challenges originate from the expansion of operations into the global arena, immigration flows and increased mobility of workers, which diversify the make-up and demands of both consumer and labour markets (Wakefield, 2001; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2012). It is often difficult to translate these societal and business macro shifts into practical problems faced by managers (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998); this holds true and becomes even more accentuated when a crisis occurs (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010a; Oliveira, 2013). Multiculturalism poses a challenge to crisis communication, as culture seems to influence crisis perceptions and interpretations (Banks, 2000; Oliveira, 2013), and even local or national

crises have the potential to engender multinational and multicultural effects (Coombs and Holladay, 2010; Frandsen and Johansen, 2010a). Nonetheless, multicultural approaches to crisis communication are very few and underdeveloped in literature (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006), especially when it comes to internal communication.

This research study contributes to developing this research area by exploring internal crisis communication in organisations with a multicultural environment. First, the paper reviews literature on intercultural communication, crisis communication and multicultural approaches to crisis communication as a relevant background for framing research study aims and significance within the academic and practice fields. Second, it provides a summary of the method used. Third, it illustrates main results from qualitative interviews among Danish managers to investigate their perspective and experiences related to multicultural workplaces and internal crisis communication. Finally, it discusses these findings and concludes by highlighting future avenues of research within this growing area of interest.

Crisis, Culture and Internal Communication

A crisis is "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organisation, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organisation" (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 8). Threats and harm are often regarded as external factors originating from the market of the surrounding environment; however, the everyday culture, structure and operating practices of an organisation produce crises as well (Kersten, 2005). Crisis communication is "the dialog between the organisation and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9). Culture impacts on how companies communicate with heterogeneous publics as well as how these respond, at both international and national level (Tung, 1993), and thus presents an additional challenge to crisis communication (Coombs and Holladay, 2010).

In literature, little agreement exists on how to define *culture*. Tens of conceptualisations have been proposed over the years (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Banks, 2000), most of them acknowledging the influence of culture on the way people interact, communicate and interpret reality. Guirdham (2005, p. 43) highlights that culture is "an imperfectly shared system of interrelated understanding, shaped by its members' shared history and experiences. Individuals are rarely conscious of their culture, yet culture affects practically all aspects of the way the people of a group interact with each other or with outsiders".

Taking a look at the scholarly literature dealing with culture and communication, it appears that the intercultural field of communication in particular has explored in depth similarities and differences between cultures and what explains such variations. The majority of studies propose dimensions of cultural variability rooted in national cultures, and associated with important differences in organisational communication (Stohl, 2000). Various taxonomies have been put forward, such as those by Hofstede (1980), Hofstede and Bond (1984) and Schwartz (1999), and cultural differences have proved to be a salient feature of interaction (e.g. Driskill and Downs, 1995).

Drawing on intercultural studies, numerous public relations scholars have investigated multicultural communication with external audiences in both international (e.g. Zaharna, 2001) and domestic settings (e.g., Fiske 2007). However, very few studies have focused on internal audiences in multicultural environments (e.g., Banks 2000). All these studies highlight the influence of culture on communication with either internal or external audiences and the necessity to adapt communications in terms of, for example, language, content, media consumption and technology use, visual features, rhetoric and argumentation strategies. This means that in addition to language adjustment, other manifestations of culture should be taken into account, as literature on intercultural rapport management also points out (e.g. Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2005). The need for

adaptation is based on the understanding that cultural differences can create barriers to communication, misinterpretations, and even work-related conflicts within organisations (Guirdham, 2005). Literature additionally suggests that in order to adapt communication effectively to multicultural audiences, it is beneficial to have as much diversity within the company as outside it (e.g. Grunig *et al.*, 2002), following Weick's (1979) principle of requisite variety. Language facility, for example, allows certain individuals to act as gatekeepers and communication facilitators (Marschan *et al*., 1997; Feely and Harzing, 2003). Further, Lyra (1991) identified the "cultural interpreter model", according to which the company should rely on communicators with the same cultural background as their audiences, or a good understanding of their culture, to facilitate communication.

Thus, a mere focus on language does not seem sufficient, nor does the adoption of a shared common language, which is often established as a solution to language barriers and coordination issues between members of different speech communities (Marschan *et al*., 1997). Generally, English is adopted as the corporate *lingua franca* to standardise internal communication, in particular in multinationals headquartered in English-speaking and Scandinavian countries (Louhiala-Salminen *et al*., 2005; Lauring and Selmer, 2010). However, previous research on multicultural organisations shows that a common corporate language cannot be taken to be neutral or cultureless (Louhiala-Salminen *et al*., 2005) and that employees from various backgrounds still view and interpret reality through their cultural and linguistic filters (Von Glinow *et al*., 2004). A monolingual solution can have detrimental effects on the relations between headquarters and foreign offices (Marschan *et al*., 1997; Feely and Harzing, 2003) and between management and employees (Ehrenreich, 2010).

Companies should therefore be aware of cultural variability when developing communication messages and channels, selecting and training organisational spokespersons and planning internal communication (Sha, 2008). In crisis situations this means that communication professionals should consider culture when framing messages that will be received and interpreted by external (Wertz and Kim, 2010) or internal publics (Mounter, 2003) with different backgrounds. Internal variety may well be beneficial in crisis situations, especially within the communication team (Oliveira, 2013), since it is conducive to resilient organisational cultures (Willihnganz *et al*., 2004) and improves multicultural crisis communication efficacy (Falkeimer and Heide, 2009; Olofsson, 2011), because it provides a pool of different resources to coping with a critical event or change.

Although multicultural issues can be identified in most crises today (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006), neither crisis management nor crisis communication research has a long-standing tradition for including an intercultural perspective (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010a), and crisis communication theory seems to lack cultural contextualisation (Lee, 2005), especially when it comes to internal communication. Falkheimer and Heide (2006, 2009) relate the paucity of multicultural approaches in the field to the dominance of functionalist and sender-oriented perspectives.

Looking at the crisis communication field as a whole, it is evident that most of the literature focuses on external communication and the crisis response strategies that companies can use to safeguard or re-establish their image or reputation among stakeholders (e.g. Benoit 1995; Coombs, 1995), although scholars increasingly highlight the centrality of issues management and risk communication (González-Herrero and Pratt, 1996; Falkheimer and Heide, 2006, 2009), as well as post-crisis discourse of renewal (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007). Regarding the internal dimension of crisis communication, a consistent lack of research and theoretical development appears (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Heide and Simonsson, 2014), even though some scholars pointed out this gap decades ago (Pincus and Acharya, 1987; Saunders, 1988).

Internal crisis communication is "the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organisation, before, during and after an organisational or societal crisis" (Johansen *et al*., 2012, p. 271). Employees form a heterogeneous stakeholder group (Fearn-Banks, 2007) with a complex and psychological dimension (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). This affects their reactions and feelings in a crisis, which could be addressed by adapting message and medium (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Since "organizations comprise individuals who would respond differently, even with the best of intentions, to crises, resulting in individual actions that could compromise the overall effectiveness of crisis management" (Gonzáles-Herrero and Pratt, 1996, p. 102), not recognizing employees as important stakeholders during a crisis can lead to a communication failure (Xu and Li, 2013). Manager-employee communication in particular can play a critical role in explaining crisis messages and creating a shared understanding (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011; Johansen *et al*., 2012). In crisis situations, employees are not passive receivers; they are active information seekers (Saunders, 1988) and sensemakers who can be mobilised communicatively by the organisation and contribute to protecting the company's reputation (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Mazzei *et al*., 2012). In fact, employees can be the most believable ambassadors for a company in crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007; Johansen *et al*., 2012).

Again the majority of existent studies on multicultural crisis communication address external audiences. Studies within this area indicate that crisis perceptions and reactions vary in different countries (Taylor, 2000) and different cultural groups within a nation-state (Olofsson, 2011; Oliveira, 2013). The use of a standardised strategy may be ineffective, since this practice ignores audiences' cultural diversity, different media access and use, and different ways of making sense of events (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006, 2009; Fearn-Banks, 2007). Thus, the complexity and multiplicity of voices involved in a crisis, as well as various intercultural aspects, should be considered part of the rhetorical arena (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010a, b).

A few studies touch upon internal crisis communication with specific reference to employees from different cultural backgrounds. Among the few studies available, Oliveira's (2013) research includes interviews with 25 communications professionals in the USA concerning cultural influences on crisis and the need to adjust internal and external crisis communication. Results indicate that practitioners consider culture a key element of crisis management, and that cultural expectations shape internal audiences' attitudes towards organisations and crises. Adaptation to cultural diversity is crucial during crisis events such as natural disasters, technical accidents, and financial and reputational crises, but also in crisis prevention and planning to identify risk factors. The study found that other dimensions, such as educational levels and professional communities, can also become salient. In another study, Mounter (2003) proposed a model for internal communication with employees located in foreign subsidiaries, presenting the case of an international oil company undertaking a major restructuring worldwide. She emphasised how internal crisis communication with people from different cultures, although they may well speak English, requires sensitive listening, empowerment of local leaders and adaptation that takes into account not only language but also cultural nuances.

On the whole, the literature review reveals that internal crisis communication is in need of theoretical development and empirical investigation, especially regarding multicultural audiences. Cultural aspects of crises have been indicated as one of the new areas to be explored in order to bring crisis communication a step further (Coombs and Holladay, 2010). This paper builds on this overlooked area of research and investigates the perspective of internal communications managers in order to gain an understanding of their perceptions regarding the relevance and role of the cultural backgrounds of employees, and collect concrete experiences of communicative practices adopted in multicultural environments.

It is necessary here to point out that the operational definition of multiculturalism adopted in the study is restricted to intercultural differences, which, as highlighted in previous studies, seem to have a significant influence on communicative aspects and sensemaking. The term culture can be usefully applied in discussing ethnic and religious groups as well as nations (Guirdham, 2005). The author of this paper is aware that individual and intra-group variations exist, and that other dimensions, like age and profession, contribute to the construction of identity and to sensemaking (Collier and Thomas, 1988; Jameson, 2007). However, for the scope of this paper the focus will be on the central challenge for communication "to maintain sensitivity to the potential dangers of stereotyping and remain cautious against minimizing or ignoring within-nation differences" (Stohl, 2000, p. 340). This basic premise clarified, the following section describes in more detail the research aims and method adopted.

Research Design

This paper aims to fill a gap in existent research by exploring internal crisis communication in multicultural environments. It does so by taking the perspective of internal communications managers in order to investigate *how they understand multiculturalism in the workplace, perceive it to be relevant for internal crisis communication and eventually adapt such communication to employees*. Managers' perspectives were chosen since they contribute to building the predominant organisational narrative that embodies the organisation to its members (Willihnganz *et al.*, 2004). In addition, in critical situations, communication and actions influence crisis perception and contribute to creating reality (Eisenberg and Riley, 2000; Stohl, 2000; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011).

Qualitative interviews were carried out to gather descriptions of participants' viewpoints and actual experiences (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Denmark was chosen as the research setting of this study with a view to the increasing immigration flow, especially over recent years, and the growing interest generated by this. People from almost 200 countries live and work in Denmark and represent about 10 per cent of the entire population[1]. This growing multicultural make-up of the labour force (and the consumer market) is posing new challenges to organisational management and communication and Danish society as a whole. Increasing diversity is calling into question the nation state-driven strategy of sociocultural integration of foreigners, migrants and minorities. This strategy is mainly focused on minimising cultural diversity in order to preserve social cohesion and welfare, as shown by research into public discourses on multiculturalism (Hedetoft, 2006; Haas, 2008) and government policies targeting non-European ethnic and religious minorities (Vad Jønsson and Petersen, 2012). This is important to point out also because understanding of and receptivity to multiculturalism in organisations have proved to be influenced by wider national discourses (Wrench, 2007).

Interviews were conducted with Danish managers from seven large organisations operating in different sectors (education, service, IT, food, healthcare, toys manufacturing, pump manufacturing). All of them employ staff with different cultural backgrounds; six of them have offices and operations abroad, and one is a subsidiary of a US corporation. A snowball sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was adopted to identify organisations where the aspect of multiculturalism is felt part of the organisational reality and internal communication challenges. In total, eight managers in charge of internal communication in their companies were involved, as in one case company the communications manager was interviewed together with the human resource director. Their roles vary from HR or communications director to communications partner and manager; they all have long-standing experience within internal communication and are thus well versed in the topic examined.

Interviews were semi-structured in order to cover main topic areas and collect comparable data from all informants (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Four interviews were conducted face-to-face

and three over the telephone, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Some interviewees were contacted afterwards for additional information, and documentary evidence was also collected in the form of internal language policies, newsletters, employee magazines and instructional videos. Interview questions were constructed in order to allow respondents to tell their own stories in their own terms as much as possible, keeping in mind that multiculturalism is a sensitive topic and social desirability bias might act as a filter in participants' responses.

Prior to the interviews, participants were provided only with a general overview of the topics of multiculturalism in the workplace and internal crisis communication to frame the main focus and scope of this study. Delimitations and specific definitions, for example, of multiculturalism and crisis, were not provided in order to allow interviewees to elaborate on their own understanding and pinpoint any element relevant to their professional experiences with crises, such as crisis types, modes of adaptation, or local or global level of intervention. Accordingly, the interview questions were open in scope and mainly addressed participants' experiences, behaviour, opinions and values (Patton, 2002). Besides collecting background and demographic data, questions touched upon the following aspects: participants' understanding of multiculturalism and crisis; specific make-up of their workplace; perceived relevance of the multicultural aspect for internal communication in general and internal crisis communication in particular; advantages and challenges posed by a multicultural environment; and approaches and practices of internal crisis communication to multicultural audiences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcripts thoroughly analysed to identify central themes and patterns across interviews (Patton, 2002). The following section elaborates on primary findings from the interviews.

Internal Crisis Communication in Multicultural Workplaces: Managers' Perspectives

The first relevant aspect emerging from the interviews is *managers' understanding of multiculturalism* in the workplace, followed by and related to the illustration of the specific *make-up of their own workplace*. Three participants define multiculturalism as a concept mainly related to someone's cultural background, comprising people of different nations, languages and religions. Three other interviewees share the same understanding but specify that the cultural aspect is part of "diversity", a broader concept including a greater array of differences such as gender, age, profession and level of education. In the words of one interviewee, "It is basically the awareness of people being different from yourself". Another interviewee presents multiculturalism as something embedded within the complexity of the organisational culture of a multinational company: "Every company has a culture based on its values, habits, history and traditions. But the best companies, especially on a global scale, should have more subcultures as well. You can have a DNA […] but the best way of showing multiculturalism is exploiting and promoting diversity".

Four interviewees describe multiculturalism as a relevant aspect in relation to the local workplace in Denmark. For example, one interviewee works in a multinational company where 50 per cent of employees in Denmark represent 144 different nationalities, these employees mainly employed in service jobs. In other cases, employees with a different cultural background work mainly within marketing, research and development, and training and education. One interviewee explains that they also try to create heterogeneous management teams in terms of cultural background, gender and organisational function. This interviewee points out that they are making efforts to build this inclusive culture in the Danish headquarters, adding that "we have a long way to go". One interviewee, referring to the country of Denmark and its current population make-up, expects the relevance and impact of multiculturalism in Danish workplaces to increase in the near future: "The fact that within the EU you can go everywhere […] that must give some challenges not only to this company, but also to other companies which choose to employ these foreign workers […] It will be a bigger issue".

In three cases, participants state that the cultural background of employees is not a real issue for the company in a Danish context, but rather for managing and communicating with colleagues and employees located in other countries. One interviewee, for example, explains that in the Danish corporate headquarters there are employees from all over the world. However, they strive to cultivate a global and inclusive organisational culture, ensured first and foremost with the adoption of English as the corporate language. The interviewee elaborates on this, stressing that the headquarters represent the place where they are most conscious about "the journey towards becoming a global business", compared to other offices and production sites located peripherally in Denmark and in the other countries, where local and national conditions prevail. The interviewee mentions, for example, the case of a production site in Sweden, where there are more than 40 different nationalities; in this reality, like others outside the corporate headquarters, employees are expected to learn and speak the local language when they join the business.

In two other cases, the cultural diversity of employees is not felt as playing a significant role within the Danish workplace, because employees who come from other countries are mainly white collars who are somewhat familiar with Danish language and culture. However, in one of these companies, they experience the multicultural challenge in a different way: the company has a matrix organisation, so 50 per cent of their Danish employees have reporting lines outside Denmark. This has led to situations where non-Danish managers reported problems or conflicts with Danish employees due to misunderstandings and cultural barriers. That is why the company has decided to start a programme promoting cultural training and exchange to help managers based abroad understand Danish culture, mentality and work values, and thus nurture positive work relationships.

Four interviewees explicitly acknowledge the *advantages of having employees with different cultural backgrounds* in their company: for two of them, for example, multiculturalism represents an asset enabling the company to see what the world looks like and successfully operate on different markets; for the others, it is presented as a strategy to attract talent and improve organisational creativity and quality of thinking.

When it comes specifically to *internal crisis communication*, all participants recognise the *relevance of the cultural backgrounds of employees when devising and adapting internal communication*. Adaptation mostly regards language, but also visuals, rhetoric and other non-verbal aspects of messages, and encompasses both interpersonal communication via internal communicators and leaders, and mediated communication via traditional and new media such as employee magazines, intranet pages and social media. Although all participants acknowledge the relevance of the cultural backgrounds of employees to internal crisis communication, and accordingly the need to adapt such communication, only four companies actually include employees' cultural backgrounds as an explicit element in their formal crisis plans.

Interviewees indicate the types of crises that, in their view, are more pertinent culture-wise and play a bigger role in the choice of communication adaptation: organisational changes like reorganisation and restructuring; changes in business strategy or top management composition; major technical and product accidents, especially in production sites based abroad; safety and workplace injuries; and emergency situations that put employees at risk, such as terrorism and natural disasters. One interviewee states that reputational crises do not necessitate any specific internal communication to multicultural employees, except for crises that involve a strong ethnic or religious dimension: in general, these situations require equally careful consideration and targeted communication to employees who share the same cultural or religious background. The interviewee mentions the example of a consumer boycott of Danish products linked to the well-known "Muhammad cartoons crisis", causing the company to engage in extensive, culturally

adjusted internal and external communication to mitigate reputational consequences on an international level.

Interviewees also make clear distinctions and prioritisations based on the *local or global contexts of intervention*. Four interviewees state that a multicultural approach to internal crisis communication mainly concerns employees working in other countries, where the cultural and communication barriers are perceived as greater. In addition, cultural distance and the need to adjust communication vary from country to country: in the words of one interviewee, "There is a different need depending on the cultural background". When communicating abroad, in most cases they rely on local communicators, who are coordinated globally and supported with written guidelines and material but have a large degree of autonomy in customising language, framing messages and choosing media appropriate to their specific realities.

Two interviewees cite the role of local communicators and the centrality of adjusted internal crisis communication during recent restructuring and downsizing processes, one relating that "what we did focus on at that time was internal communication, it was employees […] because we wanted that they knew they were key to our future success". Another interviewee mentions a crisis linked to a product quality problem in a Chinese factory, where the head office took "immediate and very, very strong action to make sure that everybody understood the urgency of contacting all the relevant constituencies and withdrawing any potentially affected products from the market", and benefited from close collaboration with the local management and communicators to implement a rapid crisis management and communication response. A significant effort was also directed at employees both during and after the crisis, the latter aiming at learning from the crisis and employee re-training. Another interviewee outlines that "We do see cultural differences when we communicate […], but we, I have to admit, have a very Danish approach to that, and maybe not that flexible". A recent financial crisis in the company had made the interviewee realise how much employees from different cultures differ in the way they perceive and react to critical situations. In that critical situation, daily internal communication to all employees was implemented to give them continuous and updated information on the situation; however, while Europeans very much appreciated this openness, the US office asked the Danish headquarters to share some positive stories as well, because the employees reacted with extensive disengagement. Finally, one interviewee stresses the difference in crisis perception and enactment between employees in the parent country and those in the foreign branches: "There is a very high alert in Denmark when it comes to crises because this is where we are born and where we still have our head office. So the Danish employees are very much committed and involved in how the company is doing".

Three participants perceive that the cultural background of employees is a relevant dimension also in relation to *internal crisis communication at the local level*, in Denmark. Again, the main form of adaptation concerns language, especially regarding communication related to crisis preparedness and safety issues. But as for global, internal crisis communication, one interviewee points out the importance of considering other stylistic and non-verbal features of communication that sometimes go overlooked. The interviewee mentions the example of a recent experience where a printed notice about the evacuation procedure was posted on the entrance door of a building for a rehearsal. The notice was written in Danish only, and even though it included what they considered clear and self-explanatory pictures illustrating the evacuation steps, misunderstandings occurred in people of non-Danish background.

At both global and local level, all interviewees stress the role of *line communication to support internal crisis communication strategy*. Line managers are depicted as key communication bridges, since they have closer relationships to their employees and know how to best communicate with and motivate them. In all the examples of crises involving foreign branches described above, line managers were highly engaged with internal communication and human resources functions and

acted as effective communicators because they were able to access the culture they work in. Line managers operating in the local multicultural workplace play a similar, significant role; for example, in one of the companies studied, internal communication flows almost entirely through line managers, because the majority of service employees do not work at the desk and do not speak or even understand Danish. Such line managers are familiar with different languages and also use body language, pictures and instructional videos to support their communication to employees.

One interviewee mentions the importance of *peer-to-peer communication* during crisis situations. The interviewee's company has been affected by the riots in Egypt, the disaster in the Philippines and the difficult situation in Ukraine; in all these critical situations, employees located in these areas continuously sent news to update the company and reassure colleagues. "We create a new kind of communication culture where we look out for each other […] It is also part of our culture where we accept our differences and by accepting our different cultures […] we care for each other".

A final aspect emerging from interviews is represented by the *challenges for internal crisis communication* to employees with different cultural backgrounds. All interviewees indicate language as the first barrier to overcome, at the local level for those not speaking Danish, and at the global level for those speaking neither Danish nor English. After language, interviewees highlight cultural barriers. In the words of one interviewee, "We know that people have different communication routines or traditions in different countries […] We know that people receive communication differently". Interviewees mention that, in their experience, cultural differences influence leadership styles, media usage, crisis sensemaking and employee engagement, which is particularly relevant in crisis situations "because they [employees] are the ones standing on behalf of our company". As illustrated above, interviewees outline that language translation is not enough; other features of communication must be adapted in order to construct aligned interpretations of the same message or event. Again, all interviewees stress the facilitator role of line managers and local internal communicators for effective internal crisis communication in multicultural environments.

Discussion and Conclusions

The qualitative interviews aimed to gain insight into internal communications managers' perspectives regarding employee multiculturalism, its relevance for internal crisis communication and influence on the choice to adjust such communication. Results on the whole reveal that all interviewees are aware of the role of multiculturalism in the workplace and in crisis situations in particular.

Although some interviewees support the view that cultural background is one component of personal identity (Collier and Thomas, 1988; Jameson, 2007; Oliveira, 2013), they share a common understanding of this term, which is linked to the employees' national origin and the cultural system of interrelated understanding that shapes their values and worldviews (Guirdham, 2005). One interviewee also points out how multiculturalism is intertwined with the organisational culture and the creation of multiple subcultures within it. Dominant culture and subcultures characterising organisations interact with the cultural backgrounds of employees, affecting work-based communication, conflict, creativity and productivity (Guirdham, 2005). This aspect underlines the tensions that organisations and corporate communication face in managing the balance between integration and multiplicity, control and flexibility (Christensen *et al.*, 2008).

Interviewees do acknowledge the challenges that employee multiculturalism creates for internal communication, yet they also highlight the organisational advantages of having employees with different cultural backgrounds. Employees with different cultural backgrounds are mainly employed in marketing, research and development, and education and customer service functions, where they contribute to a better understanding of external constituents and internal creativity. The

acknowledgment of the benefits of flexibility and plurality of perspectives related to employee diversity is consistent with proponents of the requisite variety principle and its strategic value in crisis situations (Willihnganz *et al.*, 2004; Falkheimer and Heide, 2009; Olofsson, 2011).

When it comes more specifically to internal crisis communication, all interviewees state that the cultural background of employees is a relevant aspect to consider, as it can become salient during crisis situations, influencing the way in which different employees perceive, react to and make sense of critical situations. Communication problems in fact intensify in a multicultural context (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006), especially in crisis situations involving stakeholders with culturally different and conflicting stakes. Crisis types that interviewees indicate as requiring culturally adjusted internal communication are organisational changes and severe technical, product and workplace accidents occurring within company facilities. Thus, excluding emergency situations, for example natural disasters, and external reputational crises involving ethnic or religious dimensions, these are mainly crisis events whose locus and accountability might be attributed to the organisation (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993; Coombs, 1995). Interestingly, only four companies explicitly address employees' multiculturalism in their crisis plans, although proper planning plays a crucial role and allows corporations and communications teams to learn about different cultural expectations before a crisis hits (Oliveira, 2013).

Most interviewees believe that the cultural background of employees is particularly relevant when the global level of intervention is considered – that is, when the company has to manage and adapt internal crisis communication to employees located in different countries. In this context, participants' experiences indicate that culture influences crisis perceptions, and the way communication should be framed. One of the experiences reported, for example, where the Danish approach to transparent communication caused negative reactions in US colleagues, shows the dangers of applying a determined cultural style of crisis communication without questioning or adapting it to a different context of interpretation. Culture is composed of the system of meanings that specific groups adopt to interpret and act upon reality (Banks, 2000), and thus it influences the perception and interpretation of crisis events (Eisenberg and Riley, 2000; Oliveira, 2013). Communications managers should therefore consider its influence on communication strategies (Banks, 2000). To adapt communication, participants reveal that they rely strongly on local communicators and leaders who act as cultural interpreters (Lyra, 1991), adapting messages and channels of communication.

Managers seem less concerned about employee multiculturalism in Danish workplaces. In local head offices this might be due to the predominance of staff functions with highly educated workers, and the direct presence and action of internal communication; in other cases, to the limited presence of foreign-born employees or their supposed higher knowledge of Danish work culture and language as it emerges from the interviews. It is a relevant question whether the increase in geographical distance makes internal communicators more sensitive to the cultural diversity of employees or rather takes for granted that those who live and work in the country will be more easily assimilated into the local language and culture (Guirdham, 2005). The fact that cultural diversity is more likely to be recognised as a natural and relevant element of foreign subsidiaries than Danish workplaces, might also be explained by the general tendency in Danish society to favour minimisation of differences (Wrench, 2007; Haas, 2008). In addition, interviews reveal that employees working within the company's country of origin are more committed and active in situations of crisis (Mazzei *et al.*, 2012); this is most likely explained by their higher psychological attachment (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011), as also pointed out by one participant.

However, the cultural backgrounds of employees seem to pose some particular challenges also within Danish workplaces, especially in companies with service and production functions. Since service workers and production sites are spread across the country, in addition to linguistic and

cultural differences internal communicators need to overcome complexities linked to the educational level of employees and the fact that they do not work behind a desk. It is relevant to notice that line managers operating in a Danish multicultural workplace can play a significant role, similar to the cultural interpreter model (Lyra, 1991) carried out by foreign counterparts. In one case, internal communication to service workers passes almost entirely through line managers and relies on their linguistic and communicative abilities.

Line communication, at both local and global levels, is therefore depicted as essential to overcoming linguistic, cultural and educational barriers, collecting employee feedback during a crisis, managing rumours and transmitting the learning outcomes after the crisis. Manager-employee communication is in fact critical to explaining crisis messages and building shared understanding (Mounter, 2003; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011; Johansen *et al.*, 2012).

Interview results highlight that adaptation of internal crisis communication mostly concerns language, especially when local communicators and leaders implement communication in foreign branches. This is consistent with other research in the area of multinational management, highlighting the need to translate critical information into various subsidiary languages to ensure local adherence and action, and the strategic role played by local "language nodes" (Marschan *et al*., 1997; Feely and Harzing, 2003). However, literature points out that translation is only part of the picture (Marschan *et al*., 1997; Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2005) and that even accurate communication can fail (Oliveira, 2013). Local tailoring encompasses choices related to message framing, channels, and credible communicators and spokespersons (Mounter, 2003; Oliveira, 2013).

Locally, linguistic and cultural differences are thought to be effectively overcome by adopting global values and English as the corporate language. Concerning the latter, however, adopting an official corporate language for internal communication does not instantly create a shared language culture or solve communication problems (Lauring and Selmer, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaaranta, 2012), as the example of the evacuation notice with misleading pictures shows. This highlights that cultural styles are reflected in language features (Zaharna, 2001; Guirdham, 2005). Alternatively, employees of non-Danish background are asked to learn the local language. However, also in this case the question is how choice of language and employees' fluency in that language are linked to power, control and inequality (Louhiala-Salminen *et al*., 2005; Jameson, 2007). Besides, linguistic fluency does not prevent filters linked to one's native language and culture to intervene in interpreting reality (Von Glinow *et al*., 2004). All this demonstrates that a multicultural workplace is to be conceived as a communicative challenge, and not just at the level of language translation (Eisenberg and Riley, 2000).

Finally, results highlight that employees themselves are perceived by managers as active sensemakers and sensegivers in crisis situations (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011), and interviewees are aware of the important role of employees as internal communicators and external corporate ambassadors in crisis situations (Fearn-Banks, 2007; Johansen *et al*., 2012; Mazzei *et al.*, 2012).

To sum up, the findings of this research study show how demographic and globalisation patterns that are changing domestic and international workplaces have important implications for internal communication and crisis communication. Communications managers need to consider the influence of culture on communication strategies (Banks, 2000), not only at the global level but also within nation state-boundaries. Culture is a complex construct (Jameson, 2007) that can intensify communication problems in crisis situations, as stakeholders with culturally different and conflicting stakes are involved and respond differently, even with the best of intentions, to crises (Gonzáles-Herrero and Pratt, 1996; Lee, 2005; Frandsen and Johansen, 2010a). When facing such challenges, managers are asked to promote sensitivity to cultural nuances from an audience-oriented approach (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006) and question assumptions taken for granted within

their organisation that might originate from wider political and societal discourses (Wrench, 2007). Cultural aspects of crises have been indicated as one of the new areas to be explored in order to bring crisis communication a step further (Coombs and Holladay, 2010). This research study contributes to filling this gap by offering explorative insights into internal crisis communication in multicultural environments.

However, this research study also has a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it has only considered the perspective of internal communications managers, which might differ considerably from that of employees who, especially during crises, may misinterpret and refuse the official narrative (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011). Thus, future research could explore employees' perceptions, adopting an audience-orientation (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006) and a multivocality perspective (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010b) to understand, for example, how they define culture and what their communication needs and expectations are. Further research could also investigate in more depth how employees act as cultural interpreters in internal and external contexts and play a role as active communicators and corporate ambassadors, especially in organisational crises involving a cultural or religious dimension. Second, although this study offers important insights into the relevance and practice of internal crisis communication in multicultural environments, themes and patterns found cannot be generalised, since they present the views and experiences of seven case companies. Future research would benefit from including a larger number of participants and being repeated in different countries to extend knowledge on the role played by culture in internal crisis communication. In addition, in selecting organisations to be studied, sampling criteria such as specific industry and a distinction between domestic or foreign contexts might be applied to produce more context-specific results.

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