

Crisis Sensemaking and the Public Inquiry 5

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Public inquiries and hearings are investigations conducted by governmentally mandated bodies to assess important social issues or technologies (Salter & Slaco, 1981). Public hearings and inquiries are important aspects of the life history of many organizationally based crises, and sensemaking about technological risks and crises is an important feature of inquiry discourse and documents. The purpose of this chapter is to provide insights into the central role that sensemaking plays during public inquiries and hearings into crises. The chapter also discusses the important role that public inquiries play in the crisis-management process. To accomplish these objectives, the chapter reviews key features of public inquiries that have been documented in the scholarly literature. Next, the chapter discusses the different perspectives or approaches that have been used to study crisis sensemaking during public inquiries. The chapter also describes the findings that this research has produced. Next, the chapter indicates important issues in crisis sensemaking during public inquiries that could be fruitfully explored in future investigations. The chapter concludes by addressing practical implications for managers that this research provides regarding crisis sensemaking.

Crisis Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the process by which people construct a sense of shared meanings for society and its key institutions (Gephart, 1993, p. 1469). In sensemaking, people generate a social world and then interpret it (Weick,

1995, p. 13). Sensemaking thus involves constructing features of the world that then become available to perception (Gephart, 1997, p. 588; Weick, 1995, p. 14). Sensemaking includes the invention process that precedes interpretation as well as the interpretation process itself (Weick, 1995, p. 14). Interpretation is accomplished by providing explanations and accounts of sensed features or phenomena that make the phenomena meaningful (Weick, 1995, p. 588). Sensemaking thus involves verbally interpreting actions and events (Gephart, 1992, p. 118; Weick, 1977, p. 271), producing shared or intersubjective interpretations for events, and creating assumedly shared or collective, cultural meanings for important phenomena.

Two explicit conceptions of sensemaking frame the present discussion. The first perspective is Weick's (1995, 2001) cognitive psychology. For Weick, sensemaking involves environmental scanning, interpretation, and associated responses (Weick, 1995, p. 5). The concept highlights the action, activity, and creation of meaning that results when people interpret what they have generated (Weick, 1995, p. 13). Weick's conception of sensemaking emphasizes the invention processes by which stimuli are placed in some kind of frame of reference (1995, p. 4). Weick (1995) conceives sensemaking as grounded in identity construction (p. 17); retrospective (p. 24); enactive of sensible environments (p. 30); social (p. 38); ongoing (p. 43); based on cues (p. 49); and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 55).

Sensemaking tends to occur in situations where ambiguity and uncertainty are high (Weick, 1995, pp. 91–100). Ambiguity refers to an ongoing stream of cues that support several different interpretations at the same time, as commonly occurs during jury trials (Weick, 1995, p. 91). Uncertainty refers to imprecision in estimates of future consequences that are conditional on present activities (March, 1994, in Weick, 1995, p. 95). Two types of interruptions trigger sensemaking and changes in cognition: (1) a new event that is not expected and (2) an expected event that does not occur. Weick (1995) assumes that unusual events (e.g., crises) can disrupt sensemaking and lead to further sensemaking to create a meaningful understanding of events. This view highlights the construction and bracketing of cues that are interpreted and de-emphasizes the interpretations that are produced (Weick, 1995, p. 8). Although this chapter uses Weick's perspective as a general perspective on sensemaking, his research is not explored in detail here because this research explores the initial sensemaking accomplished during crises and does not explore inquiry sensemaking *per se*.

The second explicit perspective on sensemaking used in the chapter is provided by ethnomethodology, which conceives sensemaking as practical reasoning (Handel, 1982; Leiter, 1980) that differs from the rational practices associated with scientific thinking (Weick, 1995, p. 12). Ethnomethodologists emphasize the role of the interpretive process in sensemaking. Ethnomethodology assumes that sensemaking practices create a world of sensible objects and processes (Gephart, 1997, p. 588; see also Garfinkel,

1967; Gephart, 1993, 2004; Leiter, 1980). Sensemaking is manifest in natural language use and texts, including conversations and documents. Ethnomethodology has identified sensemaking practices that make speech acts comprehensible and sustain a sense of shared meaning during interaction (Gephart, 1992, p. 118). For ethnomethodology, conversations and interaction become confusing or senseless when these sensemaking practices are disrupted. Thus, when sensemaking practices are disrupted or their effective use is prevented, senselessness emerges and sensemaking is undertaken to restore meaning and a sense of social order to a setting. Ethnomethodology, including conversational analysis, is used in this chapter to address the interpretive practices that produce a sensible world during crisis inquiry sensemaking.

The chapter also addresses insights into crisis sensemaking provided by narrative methods (Boje, 2001; Riessman, 1993), rhetorical analysis (Brown, 2000) and Habermasian critical theory (Gephart & Pitter, 1993; Habermas, 1973, 1979). Although these approaches were not developed as explicit frameworks for analysis of sensemaking, they do provide insights into the substance of crisis sensemaking and the processes through which crisis sensemaking occurs. Narrative methods examine stories told about crises. Rhetorical analysis examines how texts and discourse including narratives and figures of speech are used to persuade the reader about the truthfulness of claims that are made. Habermasian critical-theory-based research has explored how sensemaking during public inquiries challenges or reproduces legitimacy of key organizations including state agencies and private companies. Habermasian critical theory is used in this chapter to understand how crisis sensemaking is constrained by institutional features and how sensemaking is directed at legitimating or delegitimizing key social institutions.

Crisis

Crisis is defined in this chapter as a major, unpredictable event that may produce negative outcomes including substantial damage to an organization and its employees (Barton, 1993, p. 2). Crises involve negative events of sufficient magnitude that it may take time to comprehend them (Barton, 1993). Crises result from a serious breakdown or malfunction in the relationship among people, organizations, and technologies (Mitroff, 2004, p. 3). This breakdown invalidates critical assumptions humans make about people, organizations, and technologies (Mitroff, 2004).

An industrial crisis is a crisis that results from industrial activities (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller, & Miglani, 1988, p. 287). Industrial crises are a major source of damage to humans and the environment (Shrivastava et al., 1988). Four key features that define industrial crises are (1) crisis types—there are different types of crises, (2) crisis mechanisms—signals of

crises, (3) crisis systems—organizational structures, and (4) crisis stakeholders—parties including institutions and groups that are affected by crises (Mitroff, 2004, pp. 4–5). The difference between crisis management and crisis leadership is that crisis leadership addresses these four factors before, during, and after crises. Crisis leadership can be initiated by taking precrisis audits, enacting previously developed key capabilities during the crisis, and reassessing crisis performance after the crisis ends. Another model of industrial crises is provided by Shrivastava et al. (1988) who note eight key aspects of industrial crises: (1) triggering events that initiate a crisis and become a reference point for identifying crises; (2) large-scale damage is produced; (3) large economic costs emerge; (4) large capital costs accrue; (5) specific causes emerge from human, organizational, and technological factors that trigger the event and lead to regulatory, infrastructure, and preparedness failures; (6) multiple stakeholder involvement and conflict (Shrivastava et al., 1988, p. 291) since multiple stakeholders are invariably involved; (7) responses to crises including mitigation and efforts to prevent future crises; and (8) crisis resolution and extension.

Crises can also be characterized and understood in terms of an unfolding life history or sequence of events (Turner, 1976, 1978). This sequence commences in Stage 1 at a “notionally normal starting point” (Turner, 1976, p. 381) with accepted beliefs about the world and its hazards. Stage 2 involves an incubation period when unnoticed events accumulate but are ignored because they do not accord with prevailing beliefs. Stage 3 involves emergence of a precipitating event that forces recognition of a hazard or emerging crisis. For example, a large fire ball or cloud of gas may be noted in the vicinity of a pipeline, thus indicating a leak is occurring. Stage 4 is the onset of impacts where the immediate effect of the failure of cultural precautions is evident. This is followed by stage 5, rescue and salvage. Stage 6 involves cultural adjustment that is often accomplished in part by holding a governmentally organized public inquiry into the crisis. Based on information and recommendations at the inquiry, regulations and work practices are often adjusted to address the newly acquired understanding of risks and dangers that the crisis produced.

Crises thus clearly require sensing and sensemaking if they are to exist as meaningful phenomena to members of society. Indeed, a crisis exists only when certain events or cues are sensed or noticed and then interpreted as crises by sensemaking. It often takes time to detect or notice important events, or to interpret these as relevant to crises, particularly in cases of “crescive” troubles that accumulate slowly and over time (Beamish, 2002, p. 4). Also, there may be divergent views of the meaning of cues and other events. Indeed, differences among stakeholders, complex situational and communication dynamics, and conflicts in sensemaking can lead to failure to develop shared interpretations of crisis events and to the emergence of incorrect interpretations.

The public inquiry phase in the life history of a crisis is relevant to crisis management and crisis leadership. Public inquiries related to crises and

potential crises can occur at two points in the crisis process—prior to industrial development and after crises. Predevelopment hearings are frequently conducted to assess and prevent risks of large-scale technological developments before the developments are constructed and hence before crises emerge. Postcrisis inquiries that inquire into the causes, consequences, and means to prevent crises are common after the crisis. Hearings and inquiries are thus important settings where sensemaking is done prospectively to anticipate crises, and retrospectively to prevent, manage, or mitigate crises. Crises occur when sensemaking is deficient or problematic regarding human, organizational, and technological factors that could potentially cause crises.

Further, crises have two important dimensions: meaningfulness and rhetorical aspects. Events need to be conceived or labelled as crises if they are to be reacted to and addressed as crises. Otherwise, events will be interpreted as isolated events unconnected to other events. Or, crisis events and signs may even go unnoticed and their serious nature may not be understood (Beamish, 2002). Labelling or conceiving events as a crisis releases additional social processes, including efforts to avoid or escape the crisis situation, government action and funding to mitigate the crisis, and legal action. Effective crisis management also requires rhetoric because people have to be persuaded that certain actions need to be undertaken to prevent or control the crisis. Constructing events as a crisis thus requires sensemaking, communicative interaction, and persuasive communication—one or more persons or group needs to convince others that seemingly isolated and benign cues are harbingers of crisis. The rhetorical dimension of crises does not imply that crises do not “really” exist or that they are “merely” rhetorical and exist only in language (McCloskey, 1985). Rather, the research evidence shows that without persuasive communication—rhetorical sensemaking—many events would not be quickly recognized as crises and would be treated as isolated problems or ignored. Indeed, sensemaking is used at many inquiries to expose false or misleading rhetoric, specious claims, and facades that impedes recognition and control of crises.

Following this, we can define crisis sensemaking as the processes through which events and phenomena are noticed, interpreted, and reacted to as crisis events. Through crisis sensemaking, one notices certain events, interprets these events as crises, and responds to these events and phenomena as crises. Organizational crises are important events or phenomena that disrupt or threaten ongoing organizational processes and settings. Sensemaking is a central and fundamental aspect of crises. Public hearings and inquiries thus provide an important setting for crisis sensemaking.

Crisis Management

Crisis management can be defined as the activities and resources that organizational actors use to prevent, control, mitigate, recover from, and resolve

crises. Crisis management involves processes of thinking about many different crises and how they occur; anticipating systems where failures can cause crises; and planning for stakeholder actions related to crises (Mitroff, 2005, p. 205). Crisis management can thus involve preplanning for crises, although Mitroff tends to regard preplanning as crisis leadership given the rarity of preplanning and crisis preparation in organizations. Inquiry sensemaking is relevant to the crisis-management process in several ways. At a general level, inquiry discourse often investigates key topics related to the crisis such as how it was noticed, how it occurred, and how it was handled or contained and resolved. This discourse involves sensemaking oriented to assessment of past actions that can be used in planning for future crises.

Mitroff and Pearson (1993, pp. 10–11) and Mitroff (2005, p. 205) have also identified the phases or mechanisms of crisis management: (1) signal detection or sensing of early warning signals, (2) preparedness and prevention, (3) damage containment, (4) business recovery, (5) learning, and (6) redesign. Inquiry testimony and discourse usually address many of these topics, including how the event was detected, the preparations that had been undertaken, actions needed to contain damage, steps taken to get the business operating again, what was learned, and how the company has altered its practices based on what was learned through the crisis. Hence inquiry testimony and transcripts provide important insights into crises, and organizations and managers can learn from this information.

Further, Mitroff (2005) offers seven lessons for crisis management that highlight the importance of inquiry sensemaking and information provision in crisis survival. First, one needs to prepare emotionally before the crisis. Inquiry testimony reveals the emotional nature of crisis events and sensemaking. Having personnel attend an inquiry into a serious incident involving harm to persons could potentially facilitate emotional learning and encourage crisis preparation by managers and workers. Second, one needs to think critically. Critical thinking is an inherent feature of inquiry discourse. It is also a process that is stimulated and encouraged by observing or reading inquiry testimony given the extent to which conflicting facts are offered and challenged during inquiry testimony—for example, through processes of interrogation of witnesses. Third, one needs to use social and political skills. These skills are topical and visible in inquiries; hence, managers can gain insights into key social and political skills for crisis management by examining inquiry testimony and documents. Fourth, one needs to address and expect uncertainty and complexity in crisis events. These are key features of crisis events that one learns about through inquiries. Fifth, inquiry testimony often reveals denial among managers and workers—and other stakeholders—as well as revealing the consequences of such denial. Denial can be addressed and overcome by learning to think unethically and learning to view the world as a sociopath. Involvement in inquiry testimony and other processes can encourage critical thinking that can help to overcome denial. Sixth, one needs to redesign

organizations to overcome the image of an organization where parts can be added without disrupting the organization. That is, one needs to redesign organizations for crisis leadership. Inquiry testimony, questions, and reports are often oriented to understanding design defects and encouraging design improvements; hence, they are a source for learning about improved designs. Finally, Mitroff (2005) notes the importance of using existential and spiritual dimensions of life to restore meaning and purpose after a crisis. Existential and spiritual reactions are triggered by crisis events and inquiry participation, including reflection. Thus, managers and others can prepare emotionally for crises by attending inquiries into emotionally charged crises involving other organizations or personnel, by reflecting on crisis events, and by considering the existential and spiritual needs of people faced with crisis.

Crisis management is thus a process of learning and acting effectively as outlined by Mitroff and colleagues (Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff & Pearson, 1993). This chapter emphasizes communication-based issues including story-telling, rhetoric, sensemaking practices, conversations, and valid communication. It assumes that communication is fundamental to crisis management, and that all inquiries and crises involve processes of communication. Effective crisis management is aimed at preventing, managing, and controlling crises. Crisis management is not mere rhetorical legitimization of organizational action.

The Nature of the Public Inquiry

Public hearings and inquiries can be defined as investigations conducted by governmentally mandated bodies to assess important social issues or technologies (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 26). They are state-organized face-to-face ceremonial occasions that assemble legitimating and critical institutions for purposes of investigating the causes and consequences of critical social events such as organizational crises (Gephart, 1992). During public hearings and inquiries, inquiry participants seek to describe and understand important features of the events of concern. Generally these persons engage in extensive sensemaking about the events of concern. Public hearings and inquiries are similar to one another (Salter & Slaco, 1981); hence, the present chapter does not further distinguish public inquiries from public hearings.

The public hearing or inquiry process emerged in Great Britain in the 18th to 19th centuries (Kemp, 1985, pp. 178–182) when public meetings were held to draw up petitions for Parliament to endorse a proposed enclosure of public lands and to settle objections to enclosure proposals. Since that time, a large number of public inquiries have been conducted. However, “No two inquiries are alike” (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 22). Thus,

while it is not possible to specify a set of features common to all inquiries, there are important political and legal characteristics of inquiries that can be noted. First, public inquiries can be either informal or formal in terms of their structure and procedures (Boyer, 1960). An informal inquiry is similar to the town hall meeting (Boyer, 1960). The informal inquiry format allows the convenors great latitude in how to proceed. In contrast, the formal inquiry is a hearing that is similar to courtroom proceedings (Boyer, 1960; Salter & Slaco, 1981). It is conducted by a government appointed hearing board that solicits testimony under oath from witnesses who may be subpoenaed. Cross-examination of witnesses may be undertaken, formal exhibits can be provided, legal counsel may represent key parties to the hearing, and rules of evidence may be employed. The outcomes of formal public hearings and inquiries are commonly a transcript of the actual testimony—the proceedings—and also a hearing report that is provided to government agencies.

Both formal and informal inquiries differ from courtroom proceedings since inquiries have more flexibility regarding evidence than courts and they differ from courts in the way evidence is used (Salter & Slaco, 1981, pp. 191, 194). For example, formal and informal inquiries lack established provisions for disclosing information or for evaluating and weighing evidence. In terms of hearing and using evidence effectively, inquiries are highly dependent on the sensitivity and good will of inquiry commissioners (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 195). Nonetheless, inquiry testimony can be used in a court of law or can be the basis for later legal investigations. Inquiry testimony and evidence are therefore not freed from legal processes.

Second, inquiries attempt to bring the public into the planning process (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 21). Inquiries are one of three general means for public participation in policy making (Boyer, 1960). Inquiries thus allow public deliberation and input into policy-making about important social issues. Public deliberation involves debate and discussion undertaken in public that aims to produce reasonable, well-formed opinions. In public deliberation, people share or express views, understand others, revise their opinions, and reach agreement on matters of public concern (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004, p. 318). Public deliberation is a form of discursive participation that is considered the cornerstone of participatory democracy and representative government (Delli Carpini et al., 2004, p. 315).

An inquiry is thus a temporary forum that involves groups or individuals directly in discursive participation, deliberation, and public policy-making. These groups or individuals are often “active” and “noisy” advocates of an issue or position (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 21). By bringing these varied interests together, inquiries facilitate assessment of critical issues and enlarge and extend discussion of these issues (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 22). Further, accountability based on discursive participation has replaced consent as the conceptual core of legitimacy in contemporary society (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Accountability means giving an account

that publicly explains and justifies public policy. Following this, we can see that sensemaking defined as the giving of accounts that justify and legitimate public policy is central to public inquiries and hearings.

Third, public hearings tend to emerge at two points in the crisis life cycle as noted above: prior to construction of a technological system, and after an accident or crisis. Predevelopment hearings and inquiries conducted prior to development of large-scale technological systems can be used to assess benefits and problems with such systems. Predevelopment hearings seek to uncover problems that could potentially emerge during the life of a technological development (Kemp, O'Riordan, & Purdue, 1984). The "big public inquiry" is an important type of pre-development hearing. For example, the Sizewell B Inquiry in the United Kingdom was convened by the Secretary of State for Energy to examine a proposal to construct Britain's first pressurized water-based nuclear reactor (Kemp et al., 1984, p. 478). The big public inquiry commonly reflects four characteristics (Kemp et al., 1984, p. 480). First, it is held regarding proposals with national significance when the proposal is one of a series of proposals that can be expected. Second, the proposal is politically contentious and different groups have established positions that differ from one another. Third, the proposal proponent is not independent of the governmental officials or agencies that make the final decision on the proposal, and the proposal is consistent with existing priorities. Fourth, the proposal proponent can use financial, legal, and technical resources that are significantly more substantial than those of objectors to the proposal. Predevelopment inquiries thus assess potential risks and dangers of a proposed development and seek to provide strategies and policies to avoid risks from evolving into crises.

Inquiries are also commonly held following crises. Postcrisis inquiries are a "major instrument" in the cultural adjustment process that occurs subsequent to the onset and initial resolution of organizational crises (Turner, 1976, 1978). In the cultural-adjustment stage of accidents (Turner, 1976, 1978), individuals and agencies review problematic events to determine what happened. They seek to discover how culturally approved precautions could have turned out to be so inadequate (Turner, 1978, p. 91). In this process, inquiry tribunals and participants address the adjustments that need to be made to beliefs and assumptions about risks, as well as the adjustments that need to be made to laws and statutes, to prevent or avoid accidents in the future. These adjustments are based on the new understanding of the world that the crisis has provided. Postaccident inquiries are thus "a major social mechanism for adjusting to the revelations that disasters always provide, and for trying to accommodate the lessons of these revelations into collective experience" (Turner, 1978, p. 201).

The features of public inquiries demonstrate that public inquiries are heavily composed of efforts by social actors to interpret and make sense of crises (e.g., Gephart, 1993). Given that it is often difficult and dangerous

for researchers to directly observe crisis events as they unfold in real time, inquiries often provide the best available evidence concerning crisis events and crisis sensemaking despite the retrospective and reconstructed nature of inquiry accounts. They also provide direct evidence of organizational and interorganizational practices used to interpret, manage, and prevent crises and to learn from them. Further, although inquiries are often physically and temporally distant from the crisis and risk events they purport to address, inquiry sensemaking provides a window into how people and organizations undertake sensemaking about risks and crises. In addition, ideas and actions from past crises and inquiries often play a role in efforts to control a current crisis. Also, crisis actions can be selected so as to address anticipated interests and concerns of a future inquiry panel. Thus, by examining public inquiry sensemaking, we can learn how people interpret risks and threats before and after they occur. We can also learn how sensemaking is relevant to organizational adjustment and change that is intended to prevent future risks and accidents.

Public Inquiry Sensemaking

Public inquiry sensemaking has been investigated using five perspectives or approaches: narrative analysis, rhetoric, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and critical theory. This section describes these approaches, reviews research done using each approach, and illustrates the approaches using this research.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Narrative can be defined as a first-person account of events or experiences (Riessman, 1993). Narratives are used by social actors to communicate and understand rich details of experiences (Riessman, 1993) and are a key means by which people give voice to their experiences and concerns (Riessman, 1993). Public inquiries are composed in large part of testimony that narrates experiences people have had with crises. Past research that has examined public inquiry narratives has been concerned to describe and understand people's narratives and stories of crises, as recounted at inquiries, as well as their stories of participation in inquiries. Narrative oriented research on public inquiries into crises thus explores the substantive or content dimension of narratives (Gephart, in press) and stories that communicate the nature of crisis events and their implications.

Narratives and stories frame experience by emphasizing certain features of the world and de-emphasizing other features. Narrative analysis thus examines the substance of people's stories, how stories are assembled or

“put together” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2), and the cultural resources that stories use. Narrative analysis reveals how individuals and groups understand and interpret events, and how they create meaning by using narratives to make sense of experience (Barry & Elmes, 1997, p. 432).

Narratives of public inquiries into crises are uncommon in the scholarly literature. Narratives of legal action and courtroom experiences related to crises are more common. For example, Ridington (1982, 1990) has described how the Dunne-za aboriginal people from the Blueberry Reserve in northern British Columbia, Canada, used legal processes to resist sour gas wells and processing facilities on their lands following an uncontrolled blowout of highly toxic hydrogen sulfide (sour) gas. One elegant narrative of inquiry sensemaking is found in Brody's (1981) discussion of how the Dunne-za people experienced a hearing into a proposal for construction of an oil and gas pipeline.

The native people were informed of the inquiry by an announcement fixed to their community hall door stating dates, terms, and conditions. The hearing was characterized by the Northern Pipeline Agency as an opportunity for aboriginals to respond to draft conditions and terms for the pipeline even though the terms of the pipeline had already been established. The announcement was written in “tortured bureaucratese” that obscured the meaning of documents and made the pipeline a “vast and distant enigma” to the people affected.

The hearing was held on a good day to hunt—the weather was cold and clear, and a bear den had just been discovered. People talked about whether to hunt or to attend the hearing. They decided to attend the hearing and to hunt the next morning. Brody chronicles the lengthy hearing, the room arrangements, and the atmosphere. Two separate events emerged. The formal hearing was conducted by the Chair. Pipeline personnel spoke in English, using professional terms and jargon. The hearing was a business trip for these people and they were ready to leave when the hearing adjourned at 2 p.m. In contrast, Blueberry Reserve residents spoke in Beaver that required translation to English. Once the formal hearing ended, the aboriginals provided a feast and urged the visitors to stay. The aboriginals had more to say once the whites were feasting on their food and the hearing formality had dissipated. As the feast progressed, a band member brought out a dream map unpacked only on very special occasions. The people then spoke about what they wanted and needed. But the discussion ended when the white officials hurried to their buses. This puzzled the natives who expect someone to drum and chant once the dream map—a map to heaven—is unpacked.

The narrative shows how the rhetoric of economic development was used to deprive the Blueberry people of their economic future (Brody, 1981). Each group held an understanding of events that differed from that of the other culture. The two different accounts produce an ironic contrast that reveals the power effects that formal institutional logics have on the public.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Rhetorical analysis is complimentary to narrative analysis and is often applied to narratives. Rhetoric is the art of speaking and the study of how people understand (McCloskey, 1985, p. 29). It is “the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse” (Booth, 1974, in McCloskey, 1985, p. 29). Building on this definition, rhetorical analysis addresses how stories and narratives persuade readers and hearers of their authenticity, and how story features such as omissions shape interpretations (Brown, 2000). The focus in rhetorical analysis is often texts, since rhetorical analysis conceives organizational documents as a form of discourse designed to persuade readers of their truthfulness rather than as true accounts (Brown, 2000; Gephart, in press).

Sensemaking, from the view of scholars of narrative and rhetoric, is conceived as a narrative process involving interpretation and meaning production that produces intersubjective accounts (Brown, 2000, pp. 45–46). Sensemaking is accomplished through narratives that (1) make the unexpected expectable (Robinson, 1981, in Brown, 2000, p. 47); (2) allow comprehension of causal relationships so they can be predicted, understood, and potentially controlled; and (3) assist organizational participants in mapping reality (Brown, 2000, p. 47).

The rhetorical analysis of organizational texts is a craft exercise that requires creativity. There is no single accepted approach to rhetorical analysis (Brown, 2000). The rhetorical analysis of organizational documents conceives texts as an exercise in universalizing, essentializing, and panoptic control (Brown, 2000, p. 50); hence, nonuniversal, inessential, and uncontrollable features of texts and accounts are investigated (Gephart, in press). The rhetorician examines authorial strategies that construct a consistent text, legitimate professions, and avoid questioning the legitimacy of governments. Rhetorical studies of public inquiry sensemaking seek to understand how inquiry reports support the legitimacy of social institutions and extend prevailing ideologies (Brown, 2000, p. 48). Inquiry reports are considered to be texts that are designed to persuade us to accept contestable ideas (Brown, 2000, p. 48). Rhetorical analysis of organizational texts, including public inquiry reports, assumes that (1) authors embed interpretations in their texts, (2) texts are derived from and acquire meaning in relation to other texts, and (3) texts are power effects that incorporate and reflect institutional and ideological circumstances (Brown, 2000, p. 49).

The rhetorical approach to crisis inquiry sensemaking was used by Brown (2000) to analyze the Allitt Inquiry report on attacks on children in Ward 4 of the Grantham and Kesteven Hospital in the United Kingdom. The inquiry sought to explain how a nurse could commit crimes including murder against young patients and how these crimes

could go undetected if institutions and professionals were acting effectively. To explain this situation, the report constructed a narrative consistent with prevailing institutional logics and expectations (Brown, 2000). The first rhetorical theme Brown (2000) surfaced and analyzed was normalizing and demonizing. The inquiry team constructed a narrative of nurse Allitt as apparently free of disorder; for example, by recounting her normal babysitting experiences. Abnormalities such as her tendency to exhibit injuries were considered unexceptional. The sole plausible interpretation of the evidence was that Allitt went unnoticed because she did nothing unusual. However, an alternative narrative could have been created to show Allitt as demonizing: "The inquiry team deliberately made sense of ambiguous and sometimes contradictory information to construct one sort of narrative (normalizing) rather than another (demonizing), and that this represented a contestable choice, an invention not a discovery" (Brown, 2000, p. 55).

A second rhetorical practice contrasted the observation of events with the discernment of causes. Each incident was noticed individually but the pattern was only detected after lengthy police investigation. This process is plausible and resonates with people's sensemaking proclivities because people often notice events but fail to discern a pattern. Disease, limited resources, and accidental harm were plausible alternative explanations for the deaths and injuries. Third, the report uses blaming and absolving strategies to allocate responsibility for detection. Things appeared normal, the pattern was complex and only clear retrospectively, the events were unique, and the small number of previous medical homicides occurred in North America where similar detection delays occurred. Thus, institutions were absolved of blame for failure to rapidly detect the source of harm to children.

The Allitt inquiry thus shows inquiry reports are contrived rhetorical products—artefacts created to persuade us to accept a contestable interpretation of events (Brown, 2000). Inquiry sensemaking produced novel plot lines that linked events and provided explanations of events in ways previously only inchoately realized. And the report sought to close down rather than open competing plot lines and questions. The final report thus ameliorated anxiety by providing a sensible account of why Allitt went undetected, thereby increasing the public's sense of control. More specifically, inquiry sensemaking involves deployment of arguments with the intent to influence others' interpretations and meanings (Brown, 2000, p. 67). Public inquiry sensemaking as encoded in rhetorical products such as final reports is thus an exercise in power used to support the legitimacy of social institutions and to extend the hegemony of prevailing ideologies (Brown, 2000). The inquiry can be viewed as a cathartic ceremony that produced a mythical report to help society enact fantasies of control to cope with mysterious events.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) investigates accounts and the accountability of the social world by studying the sensemaking that occurs in descriptive accounts (Leiter, 1980, p. 160). Accounts are any intentional communications between two or more people that reveal features of a social setting and serve the pragmatic interests of participants (Leiter, 1980, p. 162). Accounts are descriptive accounts because they organize and render observable the features of society (Leiter, 1980, pp. 161–162); they communicate understanding; and they assist people in finding meaning in objects and events. The focus in ethnomethodology is how people depict the world—the work people do in talk and text to make the world observable (Leiter, 1980, pp. 236, 240). Ethnomethodology's interest in accounts addresses accounting or sensemaking practices members use to create intersubjective objects (Leiter, 1980, p. 163), not the content of accounts per se. The only place to find sensemaking practices is in people's talk and behavior (Leiter, 1980, p. 240).

Ethnomethodology has also been depicted as the science of sensemaking (Heap, 1979) that studies the methods or procedures of practical reasoning individuals use to give sense to the world at the same time they accomplish daily actions (Coulon, 1995). Sensemaking is “the genesis of meaning which social phenomena have for us as well as for the actors” (Schutz, 1964, p. 7, in Leiter, 1980, p. 52). Two core concepts of ethnomethodology refer to properties of social phenomena that are foundational to sensemaking are reflexivity and indexicality. Reflexivity refers to the self-constituting property of social phenomena including accounts and conversations (Garfinkel, 1967; Handel, 1982; Leiter, 1980). “Accounts establish what is accountable in a setting. At the same time, the setting is made up of those accounts” (Handel, 1982, p. 39). For example, public hearings are reflexive because crisis accounts produced during hearings produce descriptions of crises that are assumed to be external to accounts as well as constitute the setting as a hearing concerning a crisis. Indexicality refers to the natural incompleteness of words and language. Words, terms, and expressions have a fringe of incompleteness such that the meaning of terms can be clarified only by referring to the context of use of the word or term (Garfinkel, 1967; Handel, 1982, p. 40; Leiter, 1980). Thus, the meaning of a word or term depends on its context of use. There is no absolute meaning of a word independent of context. This concept or property suggests that negotiation of meaning is an ongoing task in settings where sensemaking occurs.

The focus in ethnomethodology is the ways or methods by which members of society assemble settings and behaviors so as to create and sustain a sense of social order (Leiter, 1980, p. 159). These interpretive methods or sensemaking practices provide members with the ongoing sense that the social order is an objective fact independent of perception (Leiter, 1980,

p. 160) and that the meaning of this world is shared by members of society. Four interpretive or sensemaking practices that are central to the ethnomethodological perspective (Cicourel, 1973; Garfinkel, 1967; Gephart, in press; Leiter, 1980) have been used to analyze inquiry accounts and sensemaking (Gephart, 1992, 1993, p. 1470). The *reciprocity of perspectives* is a practice where each party to a conversation assumes that they could exchange places with others in the conversation and experience the same perspective on the world. This practice is evident in discourse, for example, when one person makes gestures acknowledging they have heard what the other said. The second practice, using *normal forms*, refers to use of recognizable words and terms to refer to conventional or common (normal) features of the world. People attempt to use normal forms and expect others to do so as well. The third practice is the *etcetera principle*. This practice assumes that the often vague and incomplete aspects of conversation will be clarified or filled in later in the conversation. The final practice, *using descriptive vocabularies as indexical expressions*, refers to the assumption made in conversation that general background knowledge and knowledge of context will be used to interpret statements or actions.

The interpretive practices are promissory and do not settle the factual nature of the world once and for all (Leiter, 1980, p. 55) since interaction is an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation. Thus, ethnomethodology views social actors as actively engaged in sensemaking through conversations, textual accounts, explanations, and discourse (Gephart, 1993, p. 1470). Further, ethnomethodology has established that when sensemaking practices are disrupted, meaning begins to dissolve and members can demand and engage in remedial practices intended to restore a sense of social order. The basic concepts of ethnomethodology suggest that meaning is not inherent in events (Gephart, 1988). An event becomes a disaster when it is socially interpreted and given meaning as a disaster; hence, events become disasters through sensemaking (Gephart, 1988). For ethnomethodology, a disaster thus exists in the interpretations, narratives, and accounts of members. In contrast, members assume that disasters are events external to accounts. The meaning of events that are constructed as disasters is actively managed by groups that offer competing or divergent claims about events. Multiple and differing accounts can be produced for ostensibly the same event (Gephart, 1988). The ethnomethodological perspective thus focuses on the production of accounts and interpretations of disaster rather than treating disasters as reified events that are external to accounts.

Analysis of Sensemaking Practices

Gephart (1988, 1993) provides an analysis of crisis sensemaking using ethnomethodological sensemaking practices. This research examined

sensemaking during a federal energy board public inquiry into a pipeline accident. The accident occurred in western Canada in February 1985 and involved a fireball that erupted during efforts to repair a leak of natural gas liquids from a pipeline. Two workers died as a result of the burns they received from the fire and several other workers were seriously burned. Phase 1 of the inquiry was held in March 1985 and lasted six days. Phase 2 was held in October 1985 and lasted three days. The major participants in the hearing were the federal energy board, the company, and legal counsel for the widow of the pipeline foreman who was fatally burned and who had been the on-site supervisor of the repair effort. The board heard testimony from workers and managers involved in the repair effort, including workers who were seriously burned.

The research compared and contrasted views of the government board, company managers, and workers as a means to pose and answer the following four questions related to inquiry sensemaking. First, what were the important terms, concepts, and vocabularies used in sensemaking about the accident that occurred during the hearing? The study found that the key themes used in sensemaking were responsibility, risk, and safety. Second, how did participants use risk and blame concepts to interpret the event? Here, the study found that the board's policies and mandate prevented explicit blaming of persons. Instead, actors sought to assign responsibility and control to specific others. Organizational schemes that addressed authority, responsibility, rules, and policies were used in this process. Third, how were sensemaking practices used to interpret disasters? In this case, all witnesses, legal counsel, and board members used sensemaking practices to produce coherent accounts of events and to challenge aspects of such accounts. The district manager was found responsible for a critical decision that led to the unplanned fire and injuries. Basically, the district manager failed to order the work crew to flare or voluntarily ignite the leaking gas early in the event, an act that would have incinerated the residue and prevented an unplanned fire from occurring. The district manager was shown to have breached sensemaking practices and to have construed the meaning of events in a manner different from that of other participants in the hearing, including in particular other managers of the company, and the inquiry board.

The fourth question asked: What social entities—organizations, persons, selves—were constructed as interpretive schemes during disaster sensemaking, and what role did the schemes play in interpretation? This question addresses how key resources for sensemaking—members' conceptions of personal selves and of organizations—were used to interpret and allocate responsibility for the critical decision. In this case, the district manager's use of the organizational scheme as an interpretive resource differed greatly from the conceptions of others. For example, the board emphasized public safety as a key goal for the pipeline organization and workers emphasized and discussed personal safety. In contrast, the district

manager emphasized financial risk from flaring and the relative safety that emerged from voluntary ignition. The board and workers also constructed the pipeline organization as a clear hierarchy of authority with the district manager in the key position of authority to decide how to control the leak. In contrast, the district manager argued that on-site personnel had discretion over key decisions. The board thus viewed the company as a clear hierarchy of authority and a clear set of rules for flaring that, if followed, would have prevented the accidental fire. They held the district manager responsible for the accident because he was located in a key position of authority and because he interpreted organizational rules, policies, and general features in a problematic manner.

This study thus reveals several features of public inquiry sensemaking, summarized as propositions (Gephart, 1993, pp. 1506–1508) that may be evident in inquiries in general. First, sensemaking practices are used by inquiry participants to describe features of critical events. Second, inquiry participants use organizational schemes to interpret and explain organizational actions and identify actors who are responsible for events. Third, individual and organizational actions are interpreted using risks, hazards, and dangers as interpretive schemes. Fourth, the effectiveness of organizational and individual risk-management actions will be interpreted using organizational schemes. Fifth, actors will be assigned responsibility for events when (a) they are shown to have misunderstood procedures or behaved in a way inconsistent with organizational schemes, (b) the actors are constructed as ineffective at managing risks, and (c) actors are constructed as generally problematic selves in terms of organizational schemes. In contrast, actors will be credited with contributing to the prevention or resolution of critical events where their actions are interpreted as being consistent with organizational schemes.

Quantitative Sensemaking

Gephart (1997) used sensemaking practices to examine the neglected topic of quantitative sensemaking during hearings. This study examined the discourse that occurred at an Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board hearing into an uncontrolled flow of toxic hydrogen sulfide gas from an exploratory well being drilled near Lodgepole, Alberta, in 1977–1978. The well flowed uncontrolled for 28 days during which it released approximately sixteen million cubic meters of gas with a hydrogen sulfide content estimated at 25%. The hearing lasted two days and produced a 217-page official proceedings and a 16-page final report.

The study posed three research questions. First, what quantitative practices and terms were used in sensemaking about organizational crises, and how? Second, how were quantitative practices and measures related to management of risks and hazards? Third, what variations in quantitative

sensemaking occurred across different stakeholder groups, and what were the action implications? In terms of the first and second questions, the study found that quantitative terms were used extensively as descriptors of features of the uncontrolled flow. Detecting and affirming the existence of an uncontrolled flow was stated to have been accomplished through measurement of the flow, although the measures were estimated and were inexact. As reported in testimony, quantitative terms and measurement practices transformed subjective perceptions (e.g., odors) into objective factual hazards and led personnel to assess and interpret these hazards using mathematical and engineering practices. Quantification of hazards made hazards amenable to management although inquiry testimony also revealed that many of the measures were inexact estimates based on subjective criteria. Thus, the plausibility of claimed measures was important given the problems of accuracy of measurement. In terms of the third question, the study found that quantified hazards were basic to the rationale for the inquiry and for subsequent actions taken by the energy board. The energy board focused on procedural measures for protecting groups, on manual methods of measuring features of the flow, and on the accuracy of measures of the hazard. The board's goal was to assess hazards, separate real from other hazards, and to assess attempts by the company to mitigate the hazards. In contrast, the company's view was that individual perceptions were a primary means to detect and assess the flow and measures of the flow were supplements to perception. The major action taken by the company was thus to monitor the flow to insure that the flow did not create a hazard. From the company view, the flow was a risk but not a hazard since local conditions, e.g., wind, prevented it from becoming a hazard.

The study thus showed that quantification is important in sensemaking about the causes of oil and gas accidents. Perceptual cues such as unusual odors suggest that an uncontrolled flow of hydrocarbons may be occurring—for example, a well blowout. However, quantitative measures of the gases being released are needed to interpret perceptual cues and to transform them into facts.

Quantification and measurement are therefore sensemaking tools that allow phenomena to be identified, treated as real, and monitored. That is, quantitative sensemaking plays an important role in determining the nature, causes, and consequences of accidents (Gephart, 1997, pp. 589–590). Quantification and measurement also provide grounds for subsequent actions taken in regard to risks and hazards. Further, different groups and stakeholders used quantitative terms and sensemaking differently and there is some evidence that these differences relate to the institutional settings, frameworks, and interpretive logics of these groups. Finally, quantitative sensemaking is particularly important in inquiry sensemaking because quantification is an important tool with which professionals describe and analyze the world. Inquiries provide important occasions for professional interpretation of accident causes.

Cultural Rationalities

One study of crisis sensemaking based in ethnomethodology and symbolic anthropology investigated differing cultural rationalities used by different stakeholders during an inquiry to interpret crisis events (Gephart, Steier, & Lawrence, 1990). This research hypothesized that each distinct group or subculture at an inquiry may have its own distinctive form of organization and its own interpretive scheme (Gephart et al., 1990) or “rationality” (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). These rationalities are used in sensemaking and the management of meaning. Each rationality can be conceived as a distinctive interpretive scheme or framework used to produce a distinctive interpretation of events. The rationalities investigated were hierarchical rationality, market rationality, and sectarian rationality (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982).

The study found the three rationalities were evident at the inquiry and were used by different groups. The National Energy Board of Canada used hierarchical rationality to interpret events. *Hierarchical rationality* assumes tightly knit and clearly stratified groups that use rules and standard operating procedures to understand and control behavior (Gephart et al., 1990, p. 31). Events that threaten the hierarchy are conceived as risks. In *market rationality*, clear individual goals or proclivities are assumed to exist and group boundaries are weak. This is an individualistic culture. Achievement is evaluated in terms of some currency, and events and behaviors are interpreted in terms of rules of fair exchange (Gephart et al., 1990, p. 32). Events that produce losses in terms of some currency or that change market rules are interpreted as risks. Sectarian rationality occurs in tightly knit groups with limited stratification and high value placed on individuals and equality. Behaviors and events are interpreted in terms of individual proclivities toward goodness and evil, rather than rules. Events that threaten group integrity are conceived as risks (Gephart et al., 1990, p. 33).

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Conversation analysis is based in ethnomethodology and assumes that speakers produce “sensible and precise communication” (Lynch, 1993, p. 25) by placing words and utterances within situationally coordinated action sequences. Conversation analysis seeks to understand the underlying properties of conversation that influence how speakers coordinate their actions to create coherent sequences of talk. It investigates “the demonstrably rational properties of indexical expressions by describing recurrent sequential actions in conversation and specifying formal rules for generating their organizational features” (Lynch, 1993, p. 25). The conversation-analysis view of language contrasts with the views of philosophers and linguists who assume words and utterances are “inherently meaningful” (Lynch, 1993, p. 25).

Michael Lynch and David Bogen (Bogen & Lynch, 1989; Lynch & Bogen, 1996) used concepts from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to analyze testimony at the Iran-Contra congressional hearings. The Iran-Contra affair posed the potential for a crisis of confidence in the Reagan presidential administration because of the sales of antitank and ground-to-air missiles to Iran. A central feature of the Iran-Contra affair, the transactions threatened the credibility of the administration. The arms sale was authorized by neither Congress nor its intelligence oversight committees, and it violated U.S. policies against aiding terrorist nations. The sale was presumably intended as a means to free hostages, which also violated U.S. policies against paying ransom for hostages. The hearings addressed the legitimacy of the sale of arms to Iran.

Bogen and Lynch (1989) were interested in the methods by which official histories get assembled, and in how the social production of testimony at the Iran-Contra hearings gave rise to the irresolute features of the Iran-Contra affair (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 5). They argue that the conventional methods for producing history are an important topic for social research, and further, that the public record of the Iran-Contra hearings provides a rich documentary source for studying methods by which plausible, coherent accounts of historical events get assembled.

In their research, Lynch and Bogen (1996) depict the Iran-Contra hearing as an example of the discourse of a public tribunal and the history-producing work done by parties to an official investigation (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 1). Lynch and Bogen (1996) sought to develop insights into situated practices through which historical events are assembled and decomposed. In particular, they examined how documentary evidence was used by committees, along with details of testimonial discourse, to construct conventional history from documentary evidence at hand. They focused on procedures through which testimony was "solicited, verified, challenged and equivocated" (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 5). In this process, they examined how written documents were used at the hearing and the practical methods through which the event was assembled, contested, and stabilized (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 7). Their research thus addressed the practical, discursive methods that the interrogators at hearings used to assimilate witnesses' stories into a conventional history, and the methods that witnesses used to resist having their narratives assimilated into conventional history. This is an important domain for investigation by crisis researchers because the production of a conventional history of crisis events is a central focus and preoccupation of crisis hearings and inquiries in general. Here, I outline the findings Bogen and Lynch (1989) and Lynch and Bogen (1996) produced in relation to three important issues: (1) the production of conventional history from narratives, (2) the interrogation process at inquiries, and (3) the production of plausible deniability.

The Production of Conventional History

Bogen and Lynch investigated the conventional methods by which official histories get assembled (Bogen & Lynch, 1989, p. 197). Public hearings are oriented to producing a report that provides an official, conventional history of an event of significance—an event that is prominent in media and popular imagination (Bogen & Lynch, 1989, p. 199). Hearings are a fact-finding operation that seeks to produce a specific product—a conventional history in the form of a final report that definitively states a chronology of dates, times, events, agents, and actions (Bogen & Lynch, 1989) related to a significant event. A conventional history is a realistic account of an event presented as a “singular, cogent and univocal historical narrative” (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 58). Bogen and Lynch (1989) assume that official histories are assembled using conventional, pragmatic features of social discourse that extend beyond the context of hearing testimony. Bogen and Lynch also assume that conventional methods are an important topic for discourse analyses of social issues.

Lynch and Bogen found that the Iran-Contra hearings were viewed by investigating committee members as a fact-finding mission to produce a committee report containing a classical style history—a master narrative transcending individual narratives of witnesses produced during the hearing. The report was a product of investigators charged to write an official history and the testimony of witnesses questioned on relevant matters. As a conventional history, the report had a plain organization consisting of dates, times, and ordinary methods of reasoning and writing about events that was indifferent to issues in professional history writing (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 58). It provided a linear chronology of events (p. 59) and arranged stories of events in chronological order (p. 158). The account of events provided was stated to be factual, and no disclaimers were included in the account (p. 59). The factual account produced ironic contrasts between actors’ narratives and matters of fact. And the account often included quotations from testimony and hearing documents (p. 158).

The researchers found that a conventional history is a narrative written in an anonymous (Bogen & Lynch, 1989, p. 59) and impersonal voice (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 158). A conventional history does not provide an explicit standpoint from which the narrator came to know events, and the narrator does not play a role in the key events. Rather, the narrator’s voice frames events, interprets them, and comments on them from the perspective of a “virtual” or “superwitness” with no concrete place in the world (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 158). The narrator attempts to rise above limits imposed by “partisan interests, hidden motives, organizational divisions of labor, and temporal and spatial localities” (Lynch & Bogen, 1996,

p. 159). The questioning, answering, and use of documents that occurs in testimony on which a conventional history is based are all done with an “eye to the place” occupied by the testimony in the accumulating record on which the conventional history will be based (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 58). Thus, a detailed orientation to the production of conventional history is basic to the very constitution of the record of inquiry testimony that is produced.

Interrogation of Witnesses

A second important feature of hearings is the process of producing testimony by posing questions to witnesses. Lynch and Bogen (1996) describe this as a process of interrogation based on the idea that under the right conditions, a sequence of questions can compel a reluctant witness to disclose the truth (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 128). The interrogator thus seeks to produce truthful testimony by means of discursive examination rather than by using coercion or torture, since a coerced confession is considered suspect. Interrogation can be defined as “a form of dialogue that instantiates the possibility of an immanent, logical analysis of its own contingent performance” (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 128).

The basic rule of interrogation is that the interrogator poses questions and the witness answers them. A question requests information (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 130) although “questions may be scarcely recognizable as requests for information” (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 131). Questions in transcripts of hearings are statements by interrogators punctuated by question marks. An answer is a response or statement subsequent to a question. The identity of an utterance as an answer is based on the contingent relevance of the answer in relation to a prior question (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 131). Thus, the *in situ* identity of an utterance is based on contextual rules and relevancies and the formal speech act identity of an utterance may not correspond to how the utterance is interpreted in actual discourse (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 131). Indeed, questions from interrogators often request more than a yes or no response. For example, open-ended questions solicit stories and invite reactions (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 135). Questions can also be posed in a restrictive manner that compels a binary choice, and by using this approach one can “press” a witness into making an admission that would otherwise be avoided.

Lynch and Bogen (1996) outline seven features of interrogation they found in the Iran-Contra hearings that can also be expected in other crisis-related hearings. First, questions often take the form of assertions or descriptions that inform a witness about particular issues about which they are accountable (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 140). Second, these assertions and descriptions are presented as formulations of facts. Third, the sequential design of questioning allows the witness an opportunity to

respond after each question. Fourth, questions strongly prefigure witness confirmation and if the question is disconfirmed, the witness is burdened with the work of explaining why the question is disconfirmed. Fifth, questions are designed and understood as being linked both progressively and in sequence to a line of argument that is unfolding (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 141). Sixth, witnesses and questioners are held accountable for organizing their actions in accordance with the scheme of interrogation. Finally, interrogation places witnesses in a dilemma. In an adversarial dialogue, questions can carry or lead up to accusations and the impugning of witnesses (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 141). Given that witnesses are often asked to confirm a series of statements or questions leading up to a key question, the witness can then deny the key question or contradict it only at the cost of contradicting prior testimony. Or, the witness can accept the accusations being offered and the impugning of the person to whom the accusations are addressed.

The structure of interrogation makes the tribunal a “liminal space” where the different accounts of events confront one another in a “vivid and potentially hostile forum” (Lynch & Bogen, 1996, p. 177). For witnesses, an important issue becomes how to resist the accusations and impugning statements of the “truth-finding engine” (p. 152).

The Production of Plausible Deniability

Bogen and Lynch (1989) therefore examined how witnesses can resist having their testimony interpreted in ways that undermine their credibility. They focused on practices of story-telling and the construction of plausible deniability during the hearing. Plausible deniability is the documentary practice through which parties to an event anticipate the significance of the event and use available records and practices to facilitate denials of their activities if the record of events comes under hostile scrutiny in the future. People can be hostile natives during testimony if they were party to creating documents under consideration and did so in anticipation of hostile scrutiny. The veracity of these native accounts then becomes topical at the hearing and is resolved through discourse that addresses and reveals story-telling entitlements.

The analysis revealed how the unfolding record of testimony was put to use in situations that reflexively constituted the record. To undertake the analysis, Bogen and Lynch (1989) examined select segments of testimony at the Iran-Contra hearings given by Oliver North. The conduct of testimony relied on organizational properties of conversational story-telling—methods people use to tell plausible and coherent stories about past events. Bogen and Lynch (1989) used conversational analysis concepts to examine problems that the properties of narrative raise for the task of assembling conventional histories. That is, they examined conflicting

features of narrative history and conventional history. Narratives or stories typically report experience in which the teller plays a role and they are organized around the story-teller's experiences. The plausibility and other features of the story depend on how the teller experienced or witnessed the events retold—their unique access to events and their entitlements to tell the story from a particular perspective. The unfolding story establishes how speakers came to be in a position to know about the story and how they happen to care; that is, their local identity and story entitlements. For witnesses, the display of their entitlements is important to establishing the plausibility of the story and its objectivity. Yet conventional history presupposes objective events that are not influenced by the local character of stories and incidental observations of witnesses. Hence witnesses face a problem of providing testimony that is adequate from a conventional history perspective but which protects the respondent's entitlements as a teller of, and party to, events in question.

For example, hostile native witnesses such as Oliver North could give testimony that preserved the equivocal features of records that were products of effort to establish plausible deniability. They could deny evidence of this prior effort and provide claims consistent with equivocal features. In this case, North was questioned about efforts to enlist Central Intelligence Agency support during a shipment of HAWK missiles. Counsel sought to learn whether Mr. Clarridge, a CIA official, knew the planes carried arms and not oil-drilling parts. In reply, North said, "I did at some point confirm to him that it was not oil-drilling equipment but that it was HAWKS. As w-wuz very obvious to almost everybody out there at that point because they were reading the same sensitive intelligence that I was" (North, in Bogen & Lynch, 1989, p. 217).

North worked to disentitle himself as teller and character from Clarridge's knowledge. The temporal formulation of "point" is specifically vague and not readily placed chronologically, but fits the narrative. North confirmed to the counsel what Clarridge already knew, and indicated he did not thus "inform" Clarridge, but merely confirmed the shipment based on information from an impersonal source also available to Clarridge and others—"sensitive intelligence." North thus disentitles himself from any claim to be the source of Clarridge's original knowledge of the shipment. North told a story in which he, as a character, is placed somewhere distant from the scene. The relationship between the shipment and CIA involvement remains indeterminate and plausible deniability is produced.

This example shows how witnesses use the differing practices of conversational story-telling and doing conventional history to build a plausible basis to deny implications of the record and to create narratives that cannot be readily compared to the record. Witnesses can thereby provide accounts at hearings that resist translation into generalized narratives, thereby constraining the goal of producing a conventional history of the event.

HABERMASIAN CRITICAL THEORY

Habermas' critical theory (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992; Gephart & Pitter, 1993; Habermas, 1973, 1979, 1989; Offe, 1984, 1985) offers an integrated micro- and macro-level perspective on the production and reproduction of social order. At the macro level, critical theory posits a theory of successive crises that can occur in capitalist societies and can culminate in a legitimization crisis—a breakdown of society that emerges when the state fails to secure the loyalty of citizens. At the micro level, critical theory posits and examines how four types of speech acts that compose the ideal speech situation are enacted in social settings such that truly legitimate and democratic decisions are reached in society. The two levels of analysis are integrated insofar as speech acts in specific settings can be examined to understand how these speech acts legitimate or delegitimize macro structures such as government agencies and key social institutions (Gephart & Pitter, 1993). Critical theory is relevant to understanding crisis sensemaking because it provides an understanding of the conditions under which public hearings will be conducted by key social institutions. It also provides insights into how discourse at public hearings produces valid decisions that address broad interests, or alternatively, how communication and sensemaking are distorted to serve particular interests of capitalists. This section reviews the key features of critical theory that inform our understanding of crisis sensemaking during public inquiries.

One basic assumption of critical theory is that contradictions arise during social reproduction, where a contradiction is a tendency in a specific mode of production to destroy the very preconditions on which the mode of production depends (Gephart & Pitter, 1993; Offe, 1984, p. 132). The fundamental contradiction in advanced capitalism is the contradiction between the desire for profit and the available profit, since the desire for profit exceeds that which is available. This contradiction leads to steering problems for governments that must keep the economy vital while preserving the legitimacy of state institutions. Steering problems result in crises if they cannot be resolved. Large distributive injustices emerge in capitalist society given that in capitalism there is a tendency for profits to fall, and given that capitalists skim profit by appropriating the surplus value of labor. That is, there is an irrational basis for social distribution. This leads the state to intervene with policies that seek to defuse political conflict and to mask problems and contradictions through ideology. Ideology systematically distorts communication (Habermas, 1979; Kemp, 1985) and thus hides contradictions and conflicts.

The Crisis Cycle

Economic crises emerge because exploitation of nature requires continuous and costly increases in technical rationality to offset market forces,

and there are real limits to resources that can be extracted from given ecosystems. Thus, the state tends to intervene in the economy by means of markets and planning to preserve adequate profits. *Political crises* then arise in the administrative subsystem of society when government fails to accomplish economic imperatives (e.g., the desired rate of profit) or when capitalist interests that are served by the state become visible. *Motivational crises* arise when state-required motivations for people (e.g., the motivation to work for given wages) become discrepant from motivations supplied by the socio-cultural system. This can arise when the role of the state in protecting the hidden interests of capitalists at the expense of labor is revealed or where the demand for rewards to labor exceeds the available supply of rewards and workers interpret their share as unfair. This perceived unfairness leads people to be estranged from standard social motivations and produces a failure of what Habermas (1973) terms action-motivating meanings. These crises can thus lead in turn to legitimation crises where the state fails to secure mass loyalty. Legitimation crises carry the risks that (1) the state is threatened with disintegration, (2) the basic organizing principles of society will change, or (3) social control will be accomplished through authoritarian repression (Habermas, 1973).

The crisis potential of advanced capitalism, and the simultaneous role of the state as steering agent for the economy and legitimating agent for society, puts pressure on the state to make the legitimation system as independent of the administrative system as possible (Habermas, 1973). The result is that legitimating institutions emerge in society. These are organizations that are expert in legitimation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and that bestow legitimacy on other institutions as a means to legitimate themselves. Crisis inquiry boards and agencies are examples of legitimating institutions that respond to industrial crises by providing interpretations of events that legitimate key state agencies (Gephart & Pitter, 1993). Industrial crises also create the potential for critical institutions to emerge and to provide delegitimizing interpretations of the actions and policies of legitimating institutions (Gephart & Pitter, 1993). The public inquiry tends to emerge where critical institutions can mobilize critical interpretations and where legitimating institutions exist and have a mandate and the resources to undertake inquiry. Inquiries thus engage in sensemaking about institutional legitimacy challenges that emerge from crises.

The goal of inquiry boards is generally to relegitimize key institutions and to assign responsibility for the incidents (Gephart & Pitter, 1993). Thus, inquiry discourse is oriented to interpreting events, and both legitimating and critical interpretations are commonly produced. During inquiries, multiple and competing interpretations and rationalities become visible. To preserve governmental legitimacy, the inquiry board must resolve these inconsistencies in a manner that isolates the critical event from the authority of the legitimating institution. Inquiries can thereby be viewed as a mechanism whereby state policy-makers channel demands they

find difficult or impossible to accommodate owing to lack of fiscal and institutional resources at their disposal.

Speech Acts and the Ideal Speech Situation

True legitimation as well as rational agreements and decisions require that governmental policies be developed in a democratic manner using valid speech acts that are free from institutional constraints (Habermas, 1979; Kemp, 1985). Four types of speech acts constitute the ideal speech situation and each type of speech act is related to a specific type or form of validity. Communicatives claim to be comprehensible and they function to produce a speech situation where recognizable utterances are present. Representatives claim to be sincere or truthful and they disclose the subjectivity of a speaker. Regulatives claim to be normatively correct and appropriate in a given context, and they function to establish legitimate interpersonal relations. Constatives claim that an utterance is valid or truthful. They are grounded in experiential claims and theoretical discourse and function to represent facts. Critical theory assumes these ideal features of speech acts operate as a taken-for-granted background consensus or framework used by participants to produce, recognize, and assess the rational features of actual speech acts and the extent to which they are free from institutional constraints. Speech is rational and free of constraints if all participants to a conversation have the same chance to employ each of the speech acts.

Kemp (1985) and Gephart (1992) have applied this framework and perspective to understand discourse at public hearings. Kemp (1985) illustrates the model by examining a 100-day public local inquiry into a proposal to construct a nuclear waste fuel reprocessing plant at Windscale, England in 1977. Kemp analyzes how the inquiry process systematically distorted communication and how the subsequent parliamentary decision to allow construction of the facility failed to reflect genuine consensus and was not reached solely due to a better argument.

Critical institutions (e.g., Friends of the Earth) faced constraints on the use of constatives. They had limited funds to develop their arguments and to hire counsel, and did not receive financial support from government. Thus, objectors had difficulty presenting their cases in an appropriate way and faced difficulty in conducting cross-examination. Further, the chair of the hearing ruled economic arguments could count in favor of the development but not against it; hence, critics could not present financial arguments. External constraints on representative speech acts that sincerely expressed views included problems finding expert witnesses with knowledge of nuclear fuel reprocessing who would have been willing to testify. Most such witnesses were already involved in the industry. And the nuclear lobby provided accounts at the inquiry that were not wholly truthful accounts

(Kemp, 1985, pp. 192–193). Regulative speech acts used to command, oppose, permit, or forbid arguments were also not equally distributed. The Official Secrets Act prevented much evidence from being made public. Confidentiality was used as a reason to limit information disclosed to the public. Finally, constative speech acts allowing participants to offer and criticize arguments were institutionally constrained, in part due to the Official Secrets Act that prevented discussion of issues. In addition, inquiry procedure exempted government policy from discussion although the purpose of the inquiry was to develop government policy. And several arguments were omitted or misrepresented in the official report (Kemp, 1985, p. 196).

Kemp (1985) shows “the truthful grounding of arguments both at the inquiry itself and in subsequent parliamentary debate was hindered through misrepresentation and distortion” (Kemp, 1985, p. 196). Each of the four features of distortion-free communication was undermined; hence, any emergent consensus was a false one. Legitimacy for the decision was thus achieved through systematic distortion of communication that allowed the interests of state and capital to prevail. Public hearings may be less open, impartial, and rational than they are claimed to be. The legitimacy of the inquiry may be questioned if distorted communication allows particular interests to dominate general interests.

Gephart (1992) integrated critical theory and sensemaking practices into a framework used to understand discourse at a hearing into a fatal pipeline accident. Different groups were hypothesized to use different criteria to validate claims and to use sensemaking practices to contest the claims and interpretations of other groups. This research explored the question of how sensemaking practices were used to transform various interpretations of events into culturally rational, sensible, and standardized interpretations shared by participants. The research found that sensemaking practices transformed the situated safety logics that workers used to explain crisis actions into top-down safety logics used by regulatory agencies. Situated safety logics are the actual logics of work in action, and these allow for workers to develop ad hoc tactics or practices highly related to specific objects of concern (Baccus, 1986; Gephart, 1992). Top-down safety logics are formal safety logics that specify logical conditions that could deductively prevent accidents by formulating overriding safety mechanisms—e.g., rules and regulations that specify particular equipment and actions—necessary to prevent accidents (Baccus, 1986; Gephart, 1992). Such logics often specify a series of sequential steps or actions necessary to work safely. By transforming situated safety logics into top-down safety logics, the inquiry board was able to show how the situated logic actually used by workers was problematic, and how top-down logic that was specified in regulations would have been more effective but was not used. This process of communicative distortion allowed government legitimating institutions to allocate responsibility for the accident to workers and managers who failed to use formal, top-down safety logic. By showing

how top-down logic would have been effective had it been used, the legitimating institution showed that it is capable of preventing or mitigating critical incidents, and that defective actors have intervened in ways the institution could not prevent to pre-empt institutional control.

Summary

The five approaches to understanding crisis sensemaking that are addressed in this chapter are summarized in Table 5.1. The narrative approach addresses stories and narratives that are produced in verbal discourse and in texts. Sensemaking is addressed in terms of coherent narration of experiences that makes events meaningful and comprehensible. Narratives and narrative analysis contribute to understanding crises by providing thick, detailed descriptions of crisis events as these are experienced by participants. Rhetorical analysis builds on narrative to address how accounts given in texts and talk persuade readers that the accounts are themselves truthful representations of events. Contested or conflicting stories are also investigated and insights are developed regarding the operation of power in and through texts. Sensemaking is conceived or addressed as persuasive communication practices that allow one to expect the unexpected, understand crisis causes, and map reality. Counternarratives that seek to disrupt persuasive claims are also used for sensemaking. Rhetorical analysis contributes to understanding crisis sensemaking by showing how persuasive communication is accomplished or undermined. It also shows how crisis documents, including reports, are selectively composed or contrived.

Ethnomethodology focuses on sensemaking practices used in practical reasoning about crises that create shared meaning and a sense of social order or disorder during conversation. Ethnomethodology conceives sensemaking as the basis for meaning. Sensemaking is done using sensemaking practices to detect and understand crises. Ethnomethodology contributes a framework to crisis management that outlines sensemaking practices needed for sensible crisis communication and explains breakdowns or failures of communication. Ethnomethodology also provides insights into the allocation of responsibility and blame during crises.

Conversational analysis addresses structures and processes that underlie conversation (coordinated speech acts) and are necessary for sensible conversations. Sensemaking is viewed as the process of using conversational rules to produce coherent conversations. Conversation analysis addresses conversational structures needed for crisis communication and shows how conversational practices are used to produce important features of inquiry testimony.

Habermasian critical theory addresses macro aspects of crisis sensemaking, including the broad institutional context of society, where the

Table 5.1 Five Approaches to Crisis Inquiry Sensemaking

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Focus or Foci</i>	<i>Sensemaking</i>	<i>Contributions</i>
Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories and narratives in texts and talk • How stories are assembled • Cultural resources used in storytelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherent narration of experiences that makes events meaningful and comprehensible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows context of events • Provides thick descriptions of crisis events from participants' perspectives
Rhetorical Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How texts and textualized talk persuade readers of truth • Contested stories • Power behind texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasive communication • Narrative and rhetorical practices that make unexpected expectable, allow understanding of causes and map reality • Production of counter or anti-narratives that disrupt persuasive claims and replace these with other claims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reveals how persuasive discourse is produced and contradicted • Surfaces key themes of persuasive communication • Uncovers contrived features of inquiry reports and documents
Ethnomethodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensemaking practices that produce a sense of shared meaning and social order in conversation • Disruptions of sensemaking that create confusion • Practical reasoning about crises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis or basis of meaning • Process of using sensemaking practices to notice, recognize, interpret, understand, and act regarding crisis events • Creation of a sense of shared meaning and social order 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides understanding of practices needed for sensible crisis communication • Offers a framework for understanding production of shared meaning of crises or breakdowns in meaning during conversation and communication • Provides insights into how responsibility and blame are allocated in crisis discourse

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Focus or Foci</i>	<i>Sensemaking</i>	<i>Contributions</i>
Conversational Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensible and coordinated speech acts • Underlying structures and processes of conversation that influence how speakers coordinate speech acts to create coherent talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of conversational rules (structures) to produce sensible, comprehensible, orderly conversations that unfold without disruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides insight into underlying structures of conversation necessary for crisis communication • Reveals practices used to create conventional histories of crises; compel witness testimony; challenge, verify, or contradict testimony
Habermasian Critical Theory	<p><u>Macro</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis cycle in advanced capitalism • Contradictions in processes of social reproduction that lead to state intervention in economy and society • Irrational bases of social redistribution <p><u>Micro</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech acts • Conditions for valid, democratically enacted communication • Distorted communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of communicative, representative, regulative, and constative speech acts to produce rational arguments and decisions by democratic means where the decisions are free from institutional constraints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides integrated macro and micro framework for understanding crises • Addresses conditions where crises threaten institutional legitimacy • Provides understanding of dynamics of re-legitimation and de-legitimation of social institutions • Uncovers constraints on "free" speech including institutional power constraints • Establishes conditions for valid, democratic communication

crisis cycle operates based in irrational social distribution and contradictions in social reproduction. It embeds micro-level speech acts in this macro context and focuses on conditions needed for truthful and valid communication. Sensemaking is conceived as the use of key speech acts to produce rational arguments and decisions. Habermasian critical theory

contributes insights into crisis sensemaking by offering a framework that helps understand the social context of crises and how crises can threaten institutional legitimacy. It provides a framework for understanding constraints on speech that undermine valid communication, and it explains conditions needed for valid communication.

Discussion

This chapter shows crisis sensemaking is an explicit and often reflexive focus of testimony and evidence provided during public inquiries and hearings into crisis-related events. Although sensemaking occurs throughout the unfolding life history of crisis events, inquiries are highly visible public events that investigate what has been done or what has been decided. Sensemaking during public inquiries into crises is explicitly oriented to detecting the origins, causes, and features of crises. Inquiries use sensemaking to produce comparative data that are conducive to policy choices and recommendations that could potentially prevent recurrences of the crisis being investigated (Turner, 1978). Inquiries thus seek to ensure that some past event “must never happen again” (Turner, 1978, p. 91). To some extent, inquiries are always investigations into potential negligence or wrongdoing (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 191). Inquiries produce one-shot assessments of critical events (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 16) and often seek to allocate responsibility or blame for problematic events (Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993).

Inquiry findings and recommendations including suggestions for regulation are often provided through final inquiry reports. Inquiry reports highlight poor practices and recommended precautions (Turner, 1978, pp. 95–96). They interpret the disaster as it is now revealed rather than as it presented itself to those involved before the disaster or during the onset and critical impacts of the disaster (Turner, 1978). As a consequence, the regulations that are created seldom meet the expectations of inquiry panels or their participants (Salter & Slaco, 1981). Often, inquiries produce regulations that call for actions that are unworkable (Turner, 1978, p. 201) or that regulatory agencies are unable to perform (Salter & Slaco, 1981, p. 21). The literature thus argues that inquiry reports are rhetorical constructions designed to elicit attributions of truthfulness from target audiences (Brown, 2000, p. 45). Inquiry reports seek to reduce public anxiety about important events, and they construct elaborate fantasies of institutional omnipotence and control (Brown, 2000, p. 45). Public inquiries and reports are centrally concerned with establishing and protecting the legitimacy of key social institutions (Brown, 2000, p. 47).

This chapter has reviewed research findings from five different scholarly approaches that provide insights into crisis sensemaking during inquiries. Narrative analysis captures, analyzes, and reports first-person accounts of

crisis events. This research shows that different groups often have different conceptions or interpretations of crises. These conceptions are articulated during hearings. Rhetorical analysis analyzes how stories and narratives persuade readers to accept certain interpretations of events in the face of alternative accounts and interpretations. In particular, rhetorical analysis reveals how inquiry reports reproduce institutional power and extend the dominance of prevailing ideologies and worldviews. Ethnomethodology shows how sensemaking practices are used during inquiries to construct meaning for crisis events, and how different groups use these sensemaking practices to contest the interpretations of other groups and persons and in the allocation of responsibility and blame. Ethnomethodological research has also revealed that quantitative sensemaking is important in inquiries. This form of sensemaking transforms subjective experiences into scientific facts that become grounds for action. Conversational analysis shows that inquiries are occasions for the production of official histories of crisis events. These official histories are produced from inquiry testimony that relies on the interrogation of witnesses who may attempt to use storytelling practices to plausibly deny certain aspects of accounts that impugn their integrity or competence. Critical theory contextualizes crisis inquiry sensemaking as an attempt to resolve crises emerging from fundamental contradictions in the basic organizing principles of society. Crisis inquiries emerge to defend or restore the legitimacy of the state and key institutions. This legitimacy requires that inquiry discourse is free from institutional constraints. Yet research shows that inquiry discourse is often distorted so as to create a false sense of consensus among key stakeholders. This distortion is accomplished in part by using sensemaking practices to transform accounts of inquiry participants that reflect local safety logics into top-down logics of regulatory agencies. This transformation shows that regulatory logic would have prevented accidents if the logic had been used. Responsibility for critical events is thus allocated to those persons who were responsible for managing hazards, and who failed to use regulatory logic in this regard.

Conclusions and Implications

Crisis sensemaking during public inquiries is an important aspect of the life history of organizational crises. An examination of crisis sensemaking provides important insights into how people construct and interpret crisis events as well as how people recount crisis events they experienced on prior occasions. Several interesting research issues emerge from this literature that would benefit from further investigation. First, it would be useful to examine crises that emerged subsequent to predevelopment inquiries and to compare sensemaking practices and processes that occur

in predevelopment and postaccident inquiries. This is challenging because many crises emerge in situations where predevelopment hearings were not conducted and it is thus difficult to find crisis incidents that allow for such a comparison. Second, the sensemaking that initially detects or notices key events and that conceives these as crises needs to be investigated. Researchers are unlikely to be present during the onset stage of disasters; hence, inquiry testimony is an important and critical source of information on how people do notice and initially interpret events as crises. Comparative analysis of inquiry discourse wherein different persons recount such initial detection and interpretation could be undertaken across multiple incidents, or within given incidents and across different persons involved in the same incident. Third, it would be useful to trace sensemaking across the unfolding history of crises and thus to examine sensemaking that occurs after a crisis is contained but before a public inquiry is conducted. In addition, it would be useful to investigate postinquiry sensemaking that occurs when new regulations and recommendations are implemented for purposes of preventing crises.

Crisis sensemaking in public inquiries also reveals that public inquiries are inherently organizational and interorganizational events (Gephart, 1984, 1993, 1997) that occur in complex, interorganizational contexts (Perrow, 1999) and that have organizational and interorganizational implications for government agencies, corporations, local stakeholder groups, and even environmental organizations as well as citizens acting on their own behalf. Thus, public inquiries provide an opportunity for organizational crisis researchers to study the multilevel nature of crises and the ways that micro- and macro-level practices produce challenges and solutions to macro-social problems (Brown, 2000, p. 47). Organizational scholars have examined crises in some detail. This chapter shows that beyond being important to understanding crises, public inquiries into crises are, in and of themselves, an important (if neglected) topic for organizational research.

There are also practical implications for practitioners that emerge from the ideas in this chapter. The chapter addresses different approaches to understanding crisis sensemaking in actual contexts where it is accomplished. The approaches discussed in the chapter converge around the issue of situated crisis communication but differ in terms of how talk and discourse are analyzed, interpreted, and understood. At a general level, the chapter shows that inquiries have recurrent processes or patterns grounded in the features of communication and sensemaking addressed in the chapter. The chapter can thus help practitioners anticipate and prepare for crisis management and for inquiry participation by directing attention to important features of crises and of inquiry sensemaking and participation, and by demystifying these features.

More specifically, each approach offers useful practical insights and implications. Narrative and rhetoric encourage practitioners to listen to

and understand narratives that describe events and to be aware of the rhetorical practices that construct narratives. It is important for crisis management that stories of all impacted stakeholders be heard, not just self-serving stories or stories of dominant leaders. Understanding narrative and rhetoric can help to improve discourse at inquiries by encouraging truthful and meaningful narratives that provide richer information. It can also help identify and overcome self-serving or misleading rhetoric and can thus help managers distinguish meaningful statements from misleading statements and distortions. Ethnomethodology highlights practices of sensible, shared communication and helps practitioners recognize important features of shared meanings and agreements. It provides insights into the dynamics of sensemaking that may help managers create and sustain shared meaning during crisis communication, and recognize signs of impending breakdowns in shared meaning. Further, it encourages crisis managers to monitor the views of a range of crisis stakeholders' views of crisis issues. And it teaches crisis managers to anticipate differences of opinion among stakeholders in their views of crises.

Conversational analysis assists managers in understanding how accounts, conversations, and inquiry talk are controlled, directed, or constrained by situational features and underlying rules of conversation. Conversational analysis can thus help managers participate more effectively in inquiries by allowing them to anticipate and address or deal with these constraints during testimony and inquiry participation. Conversational analysis also facilitates an understanding of the role conversational structures play in effective communication during the active phases of crises. Further, conversational analysis has identified tactics such as plausible deniability that can be used by managers and others to resist institutional power.

Habermasian critical theory provides insights into how legitimation challenges are created and resisted by organizations, institutions, and people through use of speech acts. It also offers a practical framework that identifies features necessary for truthful and valid communication that creates a true democratic consensus in society. Habermasian critical theory could be used by managers and others to develop crisis and inquiry communication that is free from institutional constraints that distort the communication. It could also be used by institutions to redesign and improve inquiries to allow all stakeholders and participants equal access to all types of speech acts.

Taken together, the five approaches to understanding crisis sensemaking suggest that crisis management can be strengthened by enhancing crisis sensemaking. Enhanced sensemaking during discursive participation by stakeholders at inquiries is also likely to produce better inquiry outcomes. Improved crisis sensemaking is thus important for preventing and managing crises. It is also important for sustaining and advancing democratic decision making in society at large, since public participation in

deliberation about pressing social issues such as crises is essential to democratic governance and the reinstatement of democracy in contemporary society.

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