ABSTRACT

I am interested in the ideas of disaster and crisis and how individuals and organizations perceive, construct, utilize, interpret, and remember these concepts. From this empirical starting point, I seek to utilize and extend theory and practice in organizational behaviour and human resource management. My specific areas of study include organizational citizenship behaviour, power, teamwork, recruitment and selection, occupational health and safety, stakeholder theory, altruism, and philanthropy. My main interest is in applying rigorous and systematic inquiry to the currently disparate field of disaster management with the ultimate goal of de-mythologizing disaster. Over the long term, I would like to develop a critical mass of researchers with similar interests while maintaining a connection with those who experience disaster and crisis in government, communities, and business.

BACKGROUND

Context for the Research

Humans have faced disasters throughout their history. It is not surprising then that much of the organizing behaviour in the aftermath of crisis is deeply rooted in our human past and has evolved into a latent ability to organize and respond to disasters. Over time, community resilience in the face of disaster emerged, only to be replaced later by formal organizations and plans to confront disasters (Kirschenbaum, 2004). If the magnitude and frequency of disaster is an indicator, then organizations will find themselves increasingly involved in disaster response. According to the International Federation of the Red Cross approximately 201 million people were affected by disasters in 2007 with damages nearing $63.5 billion (IFRC, 2008). In the past decade more than two billion people were affected by natural disasters alone (IFRC, 2008). Rapid technological revolution, globalization with attendant interconnectedness of events, an increase in terrorist activities, the emergence of nation-states often after violent confrontations, climate change causing new weather patterns, increasing mobility of humans and animals heightening the risk of mass epidemics, and exponential population growth resulting in use of marginal lands have all contributed to a growing number of disasters and crises (Alexander, 2006; Shrivastava, 1993; IFRC, 2008).

From a personal perspective, my interest in this research stems from over ten years of experience in high-profile organizations responsible for disaster response and preparedness. My work with the International Red Cross was in the building of capacity to use information technology (IT) for disaster preparedness, and I also was part of disaster response activities across southern Africa. I am currently a senior policy advisor
with the Nova Scotia Emergency Management Office (EMO) and have been involved in the response and recovery first from severe flooding in 2003 and then from hurricane Juan that same year. As a participant observer of disaster management organizations, I have seen that the organizations that specialize in working in chaotic and unpredictable environments are themselves chaotic work environments. The focus of emergency management organizations is continually being reset because of emergent disasters and the shifting objectives of political masters or major donors. In addition, concepts such as preparedness and mitigation are difficult to achieve in practice because response duties derail or impede this work. This creates an exciting, challenging research field with rich sources of empirical data together with organizations anxious for the improvements to their practices and policies.

**Significance of the Research**

Organizations have seen the increasingly inescapable and devastating impacts of disasters and crises, and as a result the subject of disaster management has become more than a temporary diversion for public and private organizations (Coleman, 2004; Coleman, 2006; Shrivastava, 1993). However, rigorous and controlled studies on organizational disaster management have been rare, leading to what Quarantelli and Dynes (1977: 42) referred to as “doubtful and dubious” normative assumptions about our understanding of disaster. As Shrivastava (1993: 38) noted, “new concepts, theories and models” in disaster research that are “sophisticated enough to match the complexity of the crises they seek to explain” are needed. For example, much has been written about the management of emergencies, yet the behaviour of the organizations responsible for emergency management remains largely unexplored. My research will address this gap, which could be especially important given that governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector are under pressure to show effectiveness in preparing for, managing and mitigating emergencies. The mechanisms by which mitigation and response compete for resources within an organization provide an example of why this research would be significant. It is generally accepted amongst emergency management practitioners that in terms of lives, livelihoods and economic impact, the cost of response and recovery is significantly higher than that of effective preparedness and mitigation. From this observation preventative measures should consistently play a greater role in organizations than they currently do. Therefore, there should be other reasons as to why mitigation does not make serious inroads into the planning and operation of organizations. This research would examine these reasons utilizing empirical studies grounded in theories from the human resource management and organizational behaviour literature.

My short and long-term research agenda has the ability to attract significant sources of funding and to tap into a pool of graduate students. Over the past decade, governments and the private sector have been increasingly interested in funding primary academic research to help improve their disaster management effectiveness. For example, the Canadian federal government’s national Critical Infrastructure Interdependencies program has provided over $5 million to academic researchers to better understand the
complex interactions between risk, hazard, and interconnected infrastructure. Public Safety Canada and National Defence offer separate annual funding programs to doctoral students conducting research into risks, hazards, disasters, and organizations. These are indicators of the type and magnitude of funding available for this research program.

CURRENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Key Results

With the above motivation in mind, I have undertaken empirical and theoretical studies aimed at developing an understanding of the issues. In particular, I have published or presented on organizational learning (Rostis, 2007; Rostis, 2005), human resource management (Murray & Rostis, 2007; Rostis, 2008), postcolonial theory (Rostis & Mills, 2007), institutional theory (Long, Pyper & Rostis, in press), and organizational change (Long, Pyper & Rostis, in press; Rostis, in press-a; Rostis, in press-b). Some selections from these publications and their relevance to my current and future research program will be explored.

An oft-cited comment from organizations that experience crisis is the need to learn lessons so that past mistakes will not be repeated. In disaster management organizations, this philosophy is particularly emphasized as being commonplace and making common sense. However, there have been very few empirical studies on the use of lessons learned in organizations. As a contribution towards the organizational learning literature and to disaster management in particular, I undertook a qualitative survey of the knowledge management practices of public sector disaster management organizations in Canada (Rostis, 2007). The survey found that while all organizations utilize lessons learned reviews after major events, very few organizations apply these lessons to overall organizational learning.

Linked to the concept of organizational learning is that of organizational change. Within disaster management, the link between organizational change and disasters or crises is not completely understood. Disasters present themselves as a challenge for an organization, and the surviving leadership often seizes the opportunity to reshape the organization to better manage or thrive in a changed environment. There is often doubt about the extent of crisis, and whether or not the crisis is real or manufactured in order to serve the broader interests of power. To understand the mechanism of crisis and change, my colleagues and I explored the process of crisis construction and institutional theory within the context of an academic business conference (Long, Pyper, & Rostis, in press).

The above empirical research explored tentative links between isomorphism, legitimacy, and change, and found that in crisis an organization may turn to recipes that work in order to survive. However, what drives this mechanism of change? To begin the process of answering this question, I have explored the use of Foucault’s genealogy (Rostis, in press-a) and Unger’s formative context (Rostis, in press-b). Both these approaches seek to understand change, the former from a re-reading of historiography and the latter from
noticing how the taken for granted has within it the seeds of change. A further elaboration of these concepts can contribute to improved understanding of organizational change itself, and the change resulting from disasters and crises in particular.

REFERENCES


