

5-2018

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Recommended Citation

Andrew S. Pyle (2018) Intercultural crisis communication: examining the experiences of crisis sojourners, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, DOI: 10.1080/00909882.2018.1467031

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**Intercultural Crisis Communication:
Examining the Experiences of Crisis Sojourners**

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**Intercultural Crisis Communication:
Examining the Experiences of Crisis Sojourners**

In the twenty-first century, crises occurring anywhere on earth may become contexts for massive, intercultural rescue and recovery operations. Natural and manmade disasters often require the coordinated efforts of multiple, culturally-diverse actors. The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that killed an estimated 228,000 people and left more than 2 million homeless drew emergency responders from dozens of countries (Kweifio-Okai, 2014). This response required extensive coordination and cross-cultural communication efforts from individuals and organizations with differing languages, norms, beliefs, and practices. Cultural challenges are a consideration for domestic responses as well. For example, Hurricane Sandy required the coordinated efforts of responders from across the United States. Despite the shared national heritage of those responding to Hurricane Sandy, there were a variety of cultural conflicts that hampered response and recovery efforts (Nir, 2012). Emergency response efforts present opportunities for cultural misunderstandings between the host culture and responders.

Both crisis communication and intercultural communication require mindful, reflective decision-making (Langer, 1989). At the same time, the demands of both contexts make ineffective communication likely (Fleming, 1995; Hermann, 1963). Because business and personal life now occur in a global context, emergencies, disasters, and crises are likely to worsen if their intercultural communication dimensions are not carefully considered. It is therefore important to explore intercultural crisis communication for the pragmatic benefit this study offers. Additionally, it may be the case that crises, by their very nature, function as lenses on essential communication problems. These contexts lay bare the fundamental tensions in all communication situations. Mistakes made during crises are intensified by the crisis context, and

are more visible than mistakes occurring outside of a crisis. The additional dimension of cross-cultural communication can create the potential to greatly exacerbate a crisis situation.

The purpose of this research is to study intercultural crisis communication by engaging with individuals who work in crisis settings across a variety of cultural contexts. This study consists of 20 qualitative interviews with emergency responders who work both domestically and abroad. By soliciting these responders' stories, I was able to gain a sense of the dynamics of effective and ineffective intercultural crisis communication. In the following section I review relevant literature. Next, I review the method for the current study. Then, I present the results, discussion, and implications for future research in this area.

Contextual Tensions in Intercultural and Crisis Communication

Both intercultural communication and crisis communication share a tension that Langer (1989) might call a "premature cognitive commitment" (p. 22). According to Langer, this is a perspective that an individual has mindlessly accepted as true and will then defend, despite conflicting evidence in the environment. This same tension was alternately described by Weick (1988) as "cause maps" formed in an "enacted environment" (p. 307). Weick argues that people create mental if-then frameworks to help determine how to act in novel contexts. This is why military and law enforcement personnel rely so heavily on training – it allows them to function quickly and effectively when unexpected events develop.

Intercultural tension. When meeting for the first time, people make mental judgments and attributions about one another. There are certain categories that come to mind immediately, especially if the people come from different racial or ethnic groups. A familiar example for many White Americans might be meeting someone from Japan for the first time. The White individual is likely to attribute the category "Asian" to the Japanese individual. Even if the White individual

learns that the other person is Japanese, “Asian” may be as complex as the category becomes. Understandably, this type of categorization and stereotyping can be limiting and can cause conflict (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Crisis tension. Consider now the crisis context: a person in a crisis situation will tend to rely on existing knowledge frameworks and on past training to determine how to respond (Weick, 1988). An emergency responder focused on saving lives is also likely to focus first and foremost on the mission. However, a single-minded focus on saving lives can result in a responder who lacks empathy. As one emergency responder pointed out, for someone in the middle of a crisis, “this is the worst day of their life” (Pearson, personal communication). A callous comment at this point could be very damaging to the individual or community in crisis. In the short term, this problem may not seem important, especially when compared to saving lives, but communicating with empathy is vital to effective crisis communication (Seeger, 2006). Additionally, damaged relationships make future responses more challenging, if not impossible.

The logical intersection of these two complementary tensions is in the experiences of an individual responding to a crisis event outside of their own home cultural context. A person in this context could be called a *crisis sojourner*.

Sojourners: Living, Working, and Communicating Across Contexts

Since the establishment of the field of intercultural communication in the 1950s by Edward Hall’s (1959) groundbreaking book *The Silent Language*, the concept of the sojourner has been well studied. Gudykunst (1983), in developing a typology of stranger-host relationships, characterized the sojourner as a tourist visiting some place other than their home. As the field has grown, the conceptualization of the sojourner has developed. For example, Nishida (2005) defines sojourners as having specific, goal-oriented motives for visiting a host

culture, and indicates “their length of stay in a new culture is shorter than that of immigrants and refugees” (pp. 408-409). Sojourners must also engage in cross-cultural adaptation, which is a “complex process through which an individual acquires an increasing level of the communication skills of the host culture and of relational development with host nationals” (Nishida, 2005, p. 408). This definition is useful for the numerous contexts in which the concept of “sojourner” has been studied.

From the 1960s to the present, the sojourner has been studied in global business (Black & Gregersen, 1990; Hammer & Martin, 1992; Lanier, 1979), education (Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015; Keppie, Lindberg, & Thomason, 2016; Kristjansdottir, 2009), and international aid (Crabtree, 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Kvam, 2017; Paige & Martin, 1996). Each of these areas has yielded valuable knowledge about sojourners’ experiences.

Sojourners in Business

The area of literature that has most thoroughly explored the sojourner concept is research on international business. Some of the earliest literature assessing the experience of sojourners in business contexts dealt with the impact of failing to prepare individuals to successfully enter and integrate with a new culture. According to Lanier (1979), “about one-third of all personnel transferred abroad return prematurely – usually because of maladjustment” (p. 161). Lanier indicates that for some companies the failure-and-return rate was as high as 79%.

According to Tung (1982), companies tended to offer employees preparing for international engagements training that ranged from environmental briefings (“information about the geography, climate, housing, schools”), to “field experience, wherein trainees are actually sent to the country of assignment” in order to prepare ahead of time with cultural and linguistic integration (p. 65). Black and Mendenhall (1990) reviewed 29 sojourner studies from the 1960s

through the 1980s. They found training to be positively related to the development of intercultural effectiveness. Hammer and Martin (1992) built on this study by examining specific styles of training in the context of a Japanese-American joint venture. More than two decades later, this topic continues to be a subject of great interest in human resources and management literature, as organizations seek methods for improving employee adjustment and reducing likelihood of burnout and early return (Lenartowicz, Johnson, & Konopaske, 2014; Wang, Fan, Freeman, & Zhu, 2017; Wurtz, 2014).

Sojourners in Education

Higher education is another major context where successful integration of sojourners is important. It seems logical that students seeking opportunities to study abroad would also be interested in establishing relationships with host nationals and in building long-term relationships with members of the host culture. On the contrary, studies have found that relationship building with host nationals, while initially important, quickly becomes secondary or tertiary to relationship development with international students from other cultural contexts and with co-nationals also studying abroad (Schartner, 2016). Ladegaard and Cheng (2014) found in Hong Kong, students actively avoided establishing connections with host nationals unless some external factor required it. In a follow-up study, Ladegaard (2017) found that students' anxiety about integration into the host culture was tied to the concept of "the Other," and that overcoming this challenge could often be accomplished via intentional, structured discourse. This echoes the findings of Pitts' (2009) longitudinal study of students over the course of 15 months (six months pre-study, four months abroad, and five months post-study). Pitts found that by fostering intentional conversations between host nationals and international students, many of the challenges related to expectations and expectation gaps could be mitigated.

Sojourners in International Aid and Support

International aid workers represent another area with a wealth of prior literature on the experiences of sojourners. Aid workers travel to a specific location to provide assistance as needed in the areas of healthcare, community development, or rebuilding, and are in that location until work is completed. Crabtree (1998) describes two service-learning projects in which students traveled to El Salvador and Nicaragua to assist in infrastructure development and medical assistance for partner communities. These projects were opportunities to support communities in need, while also helping students develop and gain a sense of the global context in which they live and work. Crabtree found that both the community members and the students involved in the service-learning projects were empowered and better equipped for communication and engagement as a result of their time working together.

More recently, scholars have explored the concept of sustainable tourism or ecotourism and its impact on both volunteers and hosts (Björk, 2000; Ellis, 2003; Hall, 2005; Raymond & Hall, 2008). According to Raymond and Hall (2008), while there is evidence that ecotourism can result in increased cross-cultural understanding, there is also growing evidence that the ecotourism industry has led to volunteer tourism programs (VTPs), also called voluntourism. Raymond and Hall found that VTPs tend to have detrimental impacts such as reinforcing negative stereotypes, and a tendency to label host nationals as “the Other.” Raymond and Hall (2008) developed three recommendations for organizations that send individuals on VTPs:

First, they should develop programs which will be of genuine value for the local communities. Second, the importance of approaching VTPs as a learning process rather than simply an “experience” should be recognized through the use of experiential

learning techniques. Third, opportunities for interaction with other cultures should be deliberately facilitated. (p. 541)

The recommendations presented here for best practices in international aid and support echo the recommendations for sojourners in business and in education. These same recommendations may not be sufficient for sojourners in international crisis response contexts, however.

Sojourners in International Crisis Response

Cross-cultural adaptation and effective intercultural communication are vital not only for business, educational, and philanthropic contexts, but also for successful cross-cultural emergency response. Sojourners in business contexts have a range of best practices for training and preparation, with in-depth, country-specific cultural and linguistic preparation being the ideal. This is best achieved through immersion. In the context of international education, studies have demonstrated the best option for integration and success is to foster relationships and engage in dialogue over time with host nationals and other international sojourners. Sojourners in international aid draw from best practices in both of these contexts, and tend also to develop successful relationships due in part to the experience of serving alongside their host partners. Unfortunately, for crisis sojourners, these best practices simply may not be practical or possible.

Disasters, which fit the definition of crisis, are characterized by surprise, threat, and short response time (Hermann, 1963; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). For those affected, disasters create an atmosphere of both urgency and threat, creating “an intense and immediate need for information regarding what happened, who is in danger, and what is being done” (Veil, 2012, p. 290). At the same time, when disasters require international emergency response efforts, responders have a responsibility to engage in effective intercultural communication to prevent exacerbating a crisis. While this may not, on the surface, seem too challenging, consider Ting-

Toomey and Chung's (2012) definition of intercultural communication: "*the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system*" (p. 24, italics in the original). Negotiating shared meaning can be challenging enough when individuals share a language and country of origin. When cultural factors such as language, religion, expectations for hierarchy and gender, power distance, and an array of other normative differences are added as potential barriers to a rapidly developing crisis situation, there is great potential for miscommunication at best, and enhancing the hazard at worst.

Individuals in this context are likely to experience what Rothwell (2016) refers to as primary and secondary tensions. Primary tensions are the "jitters and uneasiness" felt by members of a group when it is formed, related to the uncertainties about how the group will function (p. 79). Secondary tensions, on the other hand, are the "stress and strain that occur within the group later in its development" (p. 80) and are typically characterized by disagreement and conflict. For crisis sojourners, these two tensions are potentially more pronounced than for individuals in similar contexts.

Unfortunately, there is currently a dearth of research in the area of intercultural crisis communication. Studies over the past decade have called for additional research in the area of intercultural crisis communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Lee, 2005; Ulmer & Pyle, 2016), yet this call seems to have gone largely unanswered. More specifically, a targeted keyword search of communication research databases and top journals in the field yielded no results related to the concept of sojourners in international crisis response. Emergency responders who work in diverse cultural contexts provide an ideal group to study and

learn more about the challenges inherent in crisis response for the crisis sojourner. I therefore present the following questions to seek insights from crisis sojourners:

RQ₁: What communication practices do crisis sojourners view as effective in negotiating intercultural encounters?

RQ₂: What communication practices do crisis sojourners view as ineffective when negotiating intercultural encounters?

Method

Sample

On the east coast of the United States there is an internationally deployable Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team. This team consists of approximately 200 members, many of whom serve as fire fighters and emergency medical technicians. The team also has members with expertise in areas such as engineering, engine mechanics, and canine training. The members of this team are prepared to deploy at a moment's notice anywhere in the world to respond to a disaster. In this study they are referred to as the "taskforce."

Participants. To qualify for the sample, individuals had to work in an emergency response capacity, and either have experience working internationally, or work in a context where they were regularly exposed to individuals whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. Seventeen interview participants recruited for this study and who met these criteria were members of the taskforce. Three additional participants from other organizations who met the criteria were interviewed in an effort to confirm that the experiences of taskforce members were consistent with individuals operating in similar crisis contexts in other groups.

The entire sample was male, which is largely a function of the emergency response population. According to those interviewed and the roster of the taskforce, relatively few female

individuals have pursued membership in the taskforce. The suggested reason for this relative lack of female participation is the base demographic: most of the members are firefighters on a day-to-day basis, and only 4.6% of firefighters in the U.S. are women (National Fire Protection Association, 2015). To maintain anonymity, participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Participants ranged in age from 38-51, and self-identified as Hispanic (4), Black/African American (2), American Indian (1), and White/Caucasian (13). The participants had been working in their jobs as emergency responders from as few as 4 years, to more than 20 years.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant Recruitment. The sample was gathered through purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Purposive sampling, also referred to as deliberative or strategic sampling (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000), is appropriate when the researcher asks questions that can only be answered by a certain population. The second type is snowball sampling, wherein I asked individuals I interviewed to recommend other interview candidates (Frey et al., 2000). This was important because the emergency responder population is very small, and a recommendation from a fellow team member enhanced my credibility as a researcher. Because of a collegial relationship I had developed with a member of the team, I was able to initiate this line of research. I relied on snowball sampling after my first few interviews because, although I had permission to interview team members, there was not an organizational mandate to participate in my study. I therefore needed the support of individuals I had previously interviewed to establish a platform of trust with future interview participants.

Qualitative Interviews. Interviews lasted between 19 minutes and 63 minutes, with an average length of 36 minutes. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview

schedule. This type of interview process helps to ensure that participants “hear the same questions in roughly the same way – although spontaneous follow-up probes are allowed to clarify remarks or to encourage elaboration” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 194). The interview style was what Stewart and Cash (2008) would call critical incident interviews, where the goal is to have participants tell stories and share anecdotes about their experiences. This type of storytelling interview process is also useful because it allows future readers to enter the world of the interviewee and view their experiences as the interviewee does (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

Data Management and Analysis. Data were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of the information provided by the interview participants. The recordings were then completely transcribed, yielding 181 pages of single-spaced data. Data were stored on password-protected devices and available solely to the researcher. After the transcriptions were complete, audio-recordings were reviewed as the transcripts were analyzed to maintain accuracy for analysis (Maxwell, 2005).

Data management was conducted manually, using notebooks, hand-written notes, and electronic data files to organize and make sense of data (Saldana, 2013). I attributed codes to each section of transcribed data, and eventually themes arose. For example, any time a participant mentioned language as a barrier or difficulty communicating because they did not understand the local language, I applied the code “language barrier.”

Data were then interpreted by creating links among codes and categories, deciphering meaning within themes using metaphor, relationships, and cultural understanding to interpret meanings within the data. Through this process I was able to take the specific – the experiences of research subjects – and interpret it. Through the interpretation process, I was able to determine themes across contexts. I began detecting saturation in my interview data between the eighth and

twelfth interviews, and by the time I reached interview 20 I was adding depth, not breadth, to my analysis. The final five interviews provided additional stories that enhanced my understanding of the population, their experiences, and how to answer the questions posed in the study.

Managing Subjectivity and Ensuring Credibility

Creswell and Miller (2000) recommend a number of processes researchers can follow to ensure credibility and minimize subjectivity in qualitative studies. One process implemented in this research was member checks. After data were analyzed, I presented my analysis to individuals I interviewed as well as to non-participants related to the study population. Member checks and validation from non-participant members of the population enhance the quality of results and maintain the credibility of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Member checks are an important method for data triangulation and are useful for addressing doubts about the findings of the research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Results and Analysis

As an internationally rated search and rescue team, the taskforce has a system in place for preparing members for their response tasks, and equipping them to respond to disasters both domestically and abroad. There are team members who work before a deployment to prepare culture briefings on places where the team is headed. This briefing often has more to do with safety and security than it does with cultural norms, values, and expectations. One participant indicated he would like to see more institutionalized cultural training between deployments:

I've been preaching this to my chain-of-command, above and below, before we go to another country, it bothers me because we want to know as much as we can about that country and culture before we go to that country, because we're basically ambassadors for the U. S., and the thing that bothers me is that sometimes we don't get enough...

cultural awareness before we go into a country... Sometimes we deploy within 4-6 hours, so you don't have time to really research that country or culture, the language, religion, or anything, before we go to that country...[But] when we go to another culture we need to be more sensitive to other customs and cultures. (Williams, personal communication)

This statement effectively frames the following section, as it provides a sense of the level of training this team maintains. They are experts at the highest level of their field. They are also aware of cultural needs and norms that they *should* know as crisis sojourners, even if they are not always well versed in those needs and norms.

Effective Communication for Crisis Sojourners

The first research question asked what characteristics or skills crisis sojourners employ to negotiate intercultural encounters. The following section presents the answers that arose following analysis of the interview data.

Five Components for Effective Intercultural Communication

Over the course of each interview I asked the participants to think of someone they believe excels at intercultural communication. I then asked them to tell me why that person came to mind, and had them describe the characteristics that made each person an excellent intercultural communicator. The following are the four main characteristics that participants listed as key for effective intercultural communication.

Language proficiency. Not surprisingly, one of the first topics each person mentioned as a challenge was language as a barrier to communication. While no one went into great detail about the benefits of language proficiency, multiple participants mentioned language skills as highly important for an effective response. Parker mentioned a taskforce member who is fluent in three languages, and indicated, "he's very good at communicating." This point echoes what is

found in the business sojourner literature relating to the importance of linguistic proficiency for expatriate success (Hammer & Martin, 1992). Another common characteristic that was mentioned was the value of experience.

Experience. The value of experience for communicating effectively was mentioned more than any other single attribute, skill, or trait. As Burton put it, when looking for someone who functions very well in intercultural contexts “you’re looking at your more experienced, your more tenured members that have been around a while. And I don’t think, I don’t mean to spite the newer people...but that’s just something you gain through experience” (Burton, personal communication). The person Potter mentioned stood out to him “because he’s practiced in it, in dealing with people from other nations.” Another participant indicated that, to an extent, intercultural communication skill is something “you naturally have, but probably learn to fine tune it along the way because of the environment that you’re all too often faced with” (Parker, personal communication).

One individual went so far as to say “to be quite honest, a lot of that coordination and dealing with partners outside of your agency is more of an experience thing. No one can really tell you how to communicate with your outside partners” (Roth, personal communication). There is a suggestion in the sojourner literature that extensive training can adequately prepare a sojourner in most contexts (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). For the crisis sojourner, it seems that extensive training is best paired with long-term experience for greatest effectiveness. In addition to language skill and experience, participants tended to focus on the personality traits that they believe make their teammates strong intercultural communicators.

Personality traits. Over the course of the interview process a wide array of personality traits were said to cultivate or inhibit effective intercultural communication. Participants touted a

“calm, cool demeanor” (Parker, personal communication), a person who is “even-tempered, compassionate, measured, never too high, never too low, and always contemplative” (Rogers, personal communication), and someone who is “calming, willing to listen, and trustworthy” (Roth, personal communication). Each of these traits characterizes aspects of a competent communicator as well as a strong leader (Jin, 2010; Men, 2014), so it is not surprising that these traits were selected as important for effectiveness as a crisis sojourner.

Another trait that stood out as important was empathy. This was evident not only in the answers that participants gave to this question, but also in the stories that participants told about other responders. For example, during a response in Japan, the Japanese offered to take a group out to the coastline via helicopter so that they could survey the damage and get a sense for what they were doing in the response. While flying out, the helicopter encountered turbulence:

When the up and downs in the helicopter started making some people throw up in the back, the poor guy in the back that sits up on a little tailgate that flips down on the double rotor type of helicopters...pulled his own handkerchief out and started handing it to people so they can wipe their mouths when they were throwing up in their helmets... he was super friendly and that was very nice. After, you know, seeing such a large amount of destruction, and you take it all down to something friendly like that, that makes a big difference. (Smith, personal communication)

This event struck the participant as meaningful. Even though the helicopter crewman could not speak a word of English, he recognized their discomfort and offered the small aid he could provide them. This anecdote also exemplifies a moment in which the group in question was likely able to reduce secondary tensions (Rothwell, 2016). By engaging with empathy, the helicopter crewman reduced some of the tension in the situation. Interestingly, participants

suggested that personality traits were inherent, and therefore unchanging. Fortunately for crisis sojourners, this does not seem to be the case. Recent research on personality traits suggests that training and experience can both influence our personalities, and therefore influence the way a crisis sojourner might respond while deployed (Burnette, O'boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Dweck, 2008).

Ability to manage conflict. Major disaster responses are volatile and filled with uncertainty. This type of environment is ripe for conflict, especially when a person must work with and rely on individuals whose customs, norms, values, and beliefs are likely vastly different from their own. Add a language barrier to the situation, and it would be easy to have an international incident.

One participant shared a story of attempting to manage conflict between two distinct cultural groups in the middle of an emergency response. Each group started out in conflict with the responder and his team because each assumed he was only intending to help the other group. When I asked him how he managed the situation, he answered:

The way to get around that is time – you have to get them to trust you, to get them to recognize that you are on their side and you're here to help them. The way to do that, fortunately or unfortunately, is time – being there. You know, getting them to trust you, having a relationship with the community, so when they see you coming in, having the [taskforce] colors on, they know you're coming in to help them. I'm not sure if that makes sense, but there's not a short-term fix for a problem like that. It really requires being in the community and showing them you're on their side and helping them, gaining their trust. (Roth, personal communication)

In addition to Roth's anecdote about building relationships over time and building trust to diffuse conflict, a major theme across all interviews with regard to effective intercultural interaction was the importance of building local relationships.

Build local relationships. In his work on ethics, Nilsen (1974) describes the importance of building relationships with stakeholders so that it is possible to have the types of relationships that are necessary for stakeholders to make informed decisions. This same concept applies to the responders' dedication to building relationships with members of the local population. They demonstrate clear dedication to ethical action by pursuing the types of relationships that will help local populations to thrive because of their interactions with members of the taskforce. At the core of nearly every interview was cognizance of the importance for emergency responders to build relationships with individuals and groups who have authority in the community, with the local emergency management agency (LEMA), and with members of the local population.

Participants made it clear that in a response, "local authorities" could refer to local government, the LEMA, or potentially to members of the community who have authority and influence. Relationships with local government and with the LEMA are important because they are the first line of contact for the taskforce, and will "have the ability to direct the incoming resources" (Smith, personal communication).

One participant told a story about connecting with a local leader in Haiti named Chief Z. Meadows built a relationship with Chief Z when the team responded to a school collapse in 2008. When the taskforce returned to Haiti following the earthquake in 2010, Meadows became reacquainted with Chief Z. He explained their relationship and the value of connecting with individuals like Chief Z:

We ran into Chief Z in Haiti when the earthquake happened. And he knew that oh, you know, the Americans - meaning [the taskforce] - are here. So we can, you know, use them and we're buds, and we have a relationship built, which we did, and that's kind of what we do...When we get that buy-in from them, and they remember what good work we do, then we can come back and do more good work, which we did as well in Turkey because we went there twice. (Meadows, personal communication)

Building relationships with local authorities is also important for ensuring work continues after the taskforce leaves. As one of the participants, a medical specialist, indicated, "you can interact with the ministry of health all you want, but if the local community leaders don't buy in you're going to have zero lasting impact" (Parker, personal communication). Connecting with influential locals helps members of the taskforce function more effectively over the duration of their deployment, and allows their work to continue even after they return home.

It is also important for the taskforce to build relationships with locals because the locals assist in locating trapped and entombed individuals. As they move through an area, teams will glean intelligence from locals they encounter. One participant described the process of gathering local intelligence:

If we're walking... looking at buildings that there could be life in, and there's a house and there's a person there, one of the neighbors, we can say "Hey, does anyone live here? Have you seen them? Did they get out? Were they home at the time of the emergency? Things like that. And if they tell you, "They took off. They're down the street at the Hyatt," - Okay, we don't have to check this. We know everyone's okay. (Ferguson, personal communication)

It is important to note that, despite the fast-paced, hectic context of a crisis response, the best practices presented by the crisis sojourners often echo the best practices presented in other sojourner-related research (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Hammer & Martin, 1992; Pitts, 2009). To succeed as a crisis sojourner, it is important to establish relationships, engage in dialogue, develop linguistic proficiency, and gain as much insight as possible about the host culture.

Ineffective Intercultural Communication

The second research question asked what crisis sojourners associate with ineffective practices during intercultural encounters. The following section presents the answers that arose from analysis of the interview data.

Taking Over

Taskforce members made it clear throughout the interview process that they see themselves as assisting the LEMA, local authorities, and members of the population when they deploy to a disaster event. One participant explained it the most clearly, saying: “one of our core tenets is that we’re not coming in and taking over your event, we’re here solely and primarily to assist you in your management of this event” (Rogers). Despite their high levels of training and state-of-the-art equipment, they see themselves as assets to be utilized. Even though their intent is clear from their perspective, they often face challenges from locals when they first arrive. As one participant described it, “some places that we go into, they may think that we’re trying to take over... [but] we’re there to be directed. We are an asset” (Smith, personal communication).

To minimize misunderstandings, it is important for taskforce members to establish relationships and build trust with local responders. Ferguson emphasized the importance of “[getting] the trust of [local rescue teams], because you don’t want to come in and take over their incident.” Another respondent indicated that they face the same challenges when they respond

domestically, and that they have come to expect resistance as part of setting up in any response situation. Meadows provided an anecdote describing this situation:

We were down in North Carolina for one of the hurricanes. The mayor of the town didn't want us there because they thought that we were going to be "Big Brother," that we were going to take over, and they were going to lose power and things like that. It's like, that's not the case, and you have to build relationships by trying to...offer them assistance instead of coming there with the bully type attitude. (Meadows, personal communication)

Whether responding domestically or internationally, the taskforce expects resistance and understands that building trust and strong relationships is the key to being able to conduct themselves to their full capacity in a response situation. By viewing themselves as assets to be utilized, they maintain more effective communication and avoid damaging local relationships.

Disrespect for Local Culture

The importance of not disrespecting local culture came down to two basic concerns: first, responders do not want to violate local customs; and second, responders do not want their attitude or demeanor to reflect poorly on themselves, on the taskforce, or on the United States. An example shared by two participants that highlights the desire to not violate local customs involves exchanging business cards in Japan. Initially, Jones explained how important it is to the taskforce to be aware of and trained in appropriate cultural interactions:

[Before we deploy] we look into the culture, into the religion, things that we should avoid from doing, and we try to learn from the local area. When we deployed to Japan this last year we – one of our team members is from a Japanese family, and he told us how to greet people, how to extend the business card or give someone a business card [always

holding the card with both hands], so we try to learn that – every time, and so we look for people that can assist us in learning those things. (Jones, personal communication)

While this is an example of the taskforce ideal, Williams witnessed a team member enacting the exchange of business cards in a manner that was culturally inappropriate:

One of our guys he just kind of gave it with one hand, and also when he gave it, dropped it on the floor – you know obviously you want to get a new card and give them the new card, not give them one that fell on the ground. (Williams, personal communication)

Williams went on to say the taskforce would benefit from more preparation and intercultural communication training. This anecdote highlights the importance of integrating self-reflective communication processes into training and post-deployment debriefings so that the members of the taskforce have the opportunity to learn from failure (Ulmer et al., 2015).

Another example of respecting local cultural norms was reported by Jones who was deployed in Turkey for an earthquake response: “When we traveled to Turkey, which is a Muslim state, we had to follow when people stop for prayers and stuff like that, and that wasn’t an issue” (Jones, personal communication). Another example of respecting local customs includes mindfulness of male and female interactions in predominantly Muslim cultures, and respecting religious convictions of locals even when they conflict with mission goals.

In addition to respecting local customs, the participants emphasized the importance of their attitudes during a response. One participant’s description of this concept is insightful:

Some people we had that were deployed from New York and New Jersey came with an attitude of “what’s your problem?” And, you know, that kind of talk immediately builds a barrier...So we Americans, no matter where you come from, even if you’re from the North, you’ve got to understand you can’t come with the “what’s your problem,” fire

department mentality, because they're not firefighters and they're not from the U.S....

So... some of those people that we have that have a rough, you know, demeanor, we'll just not put them at the forefront. (Meadows, personal communication)

The taskforce members seem highly aware of the potential effects of their attitudes on the individuals they meet and with whom they interact, so they report working hard to maintain appropriate attitudes that help facilitate relationship development and maintenance. This could reasonably be considered an effort at perspective-taking.

Perspective-taking, or “the ability to entertain the perspective of another” (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), is important to managing stereotypes, accepting difference, and enacting empathic responses (Davis, 1983; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1932). Perspective-taking explores questions such as “What happens when we're not on the same page?” and “What does it mean when we don't perceive things the same way?” Research in perspective-taking has shown that intentionally entertaining the perspective of the other individual can shape a person's actions, attitudes, and attributions (Regan & Totten, 1975). What the interviewees are saying when they describe the importance of respecting the locals' host culture, of acting empathically, and of seeking ways to overcome the language barrier, is how important perspective-taking is. Training that focuses on perspective-taking could help responders bridge the gap between effective intercultural communication and effective crisis communication, management, and response. The last piece of ineffective intercultural communication consists of communicating and interacting with locals without empathy for their situation and experiences.

Lacking Empathy

Emergency responders face an interesting challenge in their jobs. As one responder put it, “the fact is, our best day is their worst day, so, we'd rather have no worst day. We'd rather have,

‘Hey, we did all this training and, yeah, we don’t get deployed because nothing bad is going on’” (Clark, personal communication). The participants described the importance of respecting the emotions and reactions of people in the midst of disasters, because for them it is not simply another event, it is their life being shaken around and rearranged. While it was not explicitly mentioned by most of the sojourners, empathy was clearly a foundational best practice in the way they enact their mission. This focus is directly in line with crisis communication best practices (Seeger, 2006). The responders indicated the importance of empathy for the victims of a disaster:

We always talk about as part of the fire department... You talk to some of the younger guys, even if it’s a minor vehicle accident that we see routinely every day, and we kind of get nonchalant about it. Or do you say to yourself: “This is the worst day of their life.” So, try to be – have a little bit of compassion for the things people—you know, even if they’re kind of wound up over a nothing accident, this is the worst day of their life. So, very much the same way, when we go internationally, it’s increased exponentially, not just the worst day of their life, it’s the worst day they’ll ever see as a nation, and you can go in there, and even if it’s a smile—you’re not doing anything other than a smile and a nod, it’s greatly appreciated. It goes miles. (Pearson, personal communication)

Participants reported working hard to carry this commitment to empathy in every aspect of the response. Sometimes this commitment means continuing to search and get confirmation of life or death even after they are certain that there is no hope for survival:

In Taiwan, having to, you know, two parents sitting there with their young child buried in the rubble. You know what the deal is. You know what I mean? The difficult part was that you know, that kid had a—what is that bear name, man? I’m trying to think of this

bear...Winnie the Pooh. So, Winnie the Pooh bear is playing music. It probably got crushed, you know what I'm saying? In the background you can hear it playing music. It's the kid's bear. You know the kid's right there behind that, underneath that slab of concrete. You know what I'm saying? And the dogs ain't responding. 'Cause the dogs are only gonna bark if it's alive, you know what I'm saying? No tapping from the acoustics, nothing from the—you can definitely hear music playing from the bear. And the kid's parents right there. You know what I'm saying? Okay, we know what the end result is. We got to go through the next building. But being there and trying to explain that dialogue, which took hours, you know what I'm saying, before you could move on, through interpretation and everything else, you know what I mean? (Bush, personal communication)

The participant and his team took the time with this mother and father to let them know they had done a thorough search, and then to work with a translator to help them understand the situation. For a responder who is focused only on getting to the next site, they could have been brusque, short, and callous. They could have simply said, "There is no hope," and then moved on. Instead, they took time to work with the parents and make sure the parents knew the taskforce had done a thorough search. This heart-wrenching example powerfully captures the care that the responders take for those affected by disasters.

Discussion

Addressing the Research Questions

The first research question asked what communication practices crisis sojourners view as effective in negotiating intercultural encounters. Most of the results are not surprising as they tend to match what the literature suggests is important for intercultural communication (e.g.,

Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). The participants suggest language proficiency, intercultural experience, personality traits such as empathy, and managing conflict well are all important for effective intercultural communication. The participants also emphasized the value and importance of developing relationships with members of the host culture. Nilsen (1974) described the importance of building relationships with stakeholders to foster the types of relationships that are necessary for stakeholders to make informed decisions. This concept applies to the responders' dedication to building relationships with members of the local population. This commitment to relationship building among crisis sojourners can help local populations to thrive post-crisis.

The second research question asked what crisis sojourners associate with ineffective practices during intercultural encounters. Just as the participants were aware of an array of traits and skills that are important for effective intercultural communication, they also indicated a number of actions that, while on a deployment, would be damaging to their local relationships. Three procedures stood out from the participants' stories and examples as particularly damaging to intercultural interactions. First, participants said they never wanted to be perceived as "coming in and taking over" from the LEMA, as they view themselves as providing assistance and meeting existing needs. Next, many participants emphasized the importance of not disrespecting locals or local authorities. The last point that emerged was the importance of empathy.

Implications for Scholars

This study offers distinct implications for research at the intersection of crisis and intercultural communication. Perhaps one of the most important implications for scholarship, and an interesting area for future study, is the potential for intercultural communication best practices to be in conflict with crisis communication best practices. For example, crises require a short

response time (Hermann, 1963), while intercultural communication requires empathic engagement, active listening, and bracketing one's own cultural views to understand the perspective of the other – all of which take valuable time to enact effectively (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Some of the best practices of crisis communication, therefore, seem to stand in conflict with intercultural communication best practices. On the other hand, there is also clear convergence with effective communication across crisis and intercultural communication contexts. For example, seeking opportunities to build relationships and partner with local stakeholders is vital to any emergency response (Seeger, 2006), and is in line with the intercultural expectations of seeking common ground and communicating with empathy. Scholars in these areas should continue to explore opportunities for understanding the potential convergence and divergence of intercultural and crisis communication best practices.

Implications for Practitioners

The lessons presented by the taskforce members can provide some useful implications for other crisis sojourners. First and foremost, crisis sojourners must begin any deployment by seeking out trust-based relationships with host nationals and local leaders. These relationships will serve a variety of purposes, including opportunities for empathy and perspective-taking, increased response effectiveness via increased trust, and an opportunity for insights into local norms and values. Additionally, as demonstrated by the example of establishing and maintaining a relationship with Chief Z in Haiti, long-term relationship development and maintenance can help crisis sojourners to be more effective across multiple response efforts.

To prepare crisis sojourners for this type of communication engagement on a deployment, entities and organizations that send out crisis sojourners should cultivate long-term training programs to equip sojourners with communication skills to accomplish these goals. For

example, one emergency responder indicated simulations are important because they “keep everyone’s skills sharp” and they “fill a void” of experience between deployments. This training could also focus on language proficiency and mindful self-awareness.

These recommendations echo what exists in other literature on sojourners, such as building relationships with host nationals (Pitts, 2009), and engaging in training to learn more about cultural norms and to develop linguistic proficiency (Hammer & Martin, 1992). There is meaningful overlap between the crisis sojourner context and what we see in the literature related to sojourners in business and international aid. In those two contexts, individuals must maintain a clear focus on mission-related goals (e.g., making a deal, operating a factory, or coordinating community development as part of a humanitarian program), while also respecting and responding to the intercultural communication factors in their respective contexts. Crisis sojourners must also be ready to pursue intercultural engagement goals at the same time they are maintaining a focus on their mission-related goals (e.g., saving lives and reducing impact of the crisis). This is distinctly different from what we see in the educational sojourner literature, where a primary focus of programs is generally to learn about and develop relationships with host nationals. Even though the tendency of response organizations and responders may be to rush in and ignore customs in the interest of saving lives, the core focus of any crisis sojourner must be on establishing and maintaining strong relationships so that they can have a greater likelihood of current and future mission success.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations that must be addressed in the structure and nature of this study. First, the findings of this study are shaped by its sample and the nature of data collection. The results are based on the input from responders alone, not from those affected by the

disasters. The study also focuses solely on communication during the crisis, and does not explore pre- or post-crisis communication. I was not able to visit the locations of the disaster post-crisis to conduct interviews with those affected by the disasters. Without firsthand experience, I must rely on the shared experience of the responders. In future research, it will be important to study the types of communication that can increase effectiveness pre- and post-crisis, and to engage with host nationals post-crisis to learn from their experiences in these contexts.

Additionally, to begin applying lessons from this study to other contexts, it will be useful to conduct more in-depth research with this population and similar populations. For example, it will be useful to conduct survey research to test and expand the findings of the current study. Conducting this research with additional groups will provide greater insight into what is effective in intercultural crisis communication, as well as what types of training people need to effectively manage intercultural crises. By determining what types of training exercises are most effective, it will be possible to develop training regimens that incorporate more intercultural communication concepts and build on intercultural crisis communication competence. Future research should explore methods for training responders and individuals in similar contexts to make sense of intercultural communication dimensions within crisis contexts.

Conclusion

Intercultural emergency events are occurring more and more frequently (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Over time, there will be more opportunities for collaboration as well as for miscommunication for individuals working as crisis sojourners. There is much to learn from international crises about the ways in which stakeholders in such contexts perceive painful and dramatic events. Communication scholars also have a great opportunity to discover methods for

improving the education and training available to those who risk their lives to assist individuals, families, and communities affected by major disaster events.

This research has shown that one way in which we can better understand crisis communication is through the experience of the crisis sojourner. This line of research will only become more relevant over time. Beyond the crisis context, this research has possible implications for individuals in many fields, from effective public relations practice, to humanitarian efforts such as Doctors Without Borders or the Peace Corps. Crisis sojourners provide a window into contexts that allow researchers to make sense of fundamental communication problems. By working with crisis sojourners, researchers can make sense of how to function in the most extreme circumstances. As members of a global community, we have an opportunity to prepare for the long-term challenges of addressing our greatest crises together.

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