Crisis Uncertainty: A Nation Living in Fear After the Attack on America-War on Terrorism

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After the September 11 terrorist attacks, 13 focus groups were conducted utilizing a structured focus group protocol for 53 individuals. The uncertain experiences among respondents illustrated how individuals reached into themselves and out to others to understand their specified needs at their time of need. Findings suggested that international students connected past social and historical events to the 9/11 attacks, perceptions of 9/11 led to: causal explanations, security fears, and developed patriotism. Additionally, cultural profiling emerged as worldviews of the cultural other shifted in interactions, and the primary sources for reducing uncertainty were forms of media.

On September 11, 2001, tragedy struck the United States of America. Terrorists bombed the Twin Towers in New York City, and the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C., and they crashed a plane filled with passengers into a field in Pennsylvania by hijacking American commercial airplanes and turning them into weapons of mass destruction. Over 3000 people died in the attacks leaving Americans and the world in a state of uncertainty, shock and disbelief for months and years to come. The purpose of this paper is to present uncertain voices that emerged from participating in focus groups to continue an exploration of “urgent” and “consequential” focal points (Smith, 1982, p. 14) in communication research and to illustrate the need for crisis communication specialists to reach beyond financial organizational management to addressing how individuals are affected by the crisis.

Given that the framework of crisis communication research is devoid of any discussion of uncertainty and uncertainty reduction, the experiences of uncertainty articulated by respondents in this study contributes to the extension of crisis communication research and the theory of uncertainty reduction. Camara (2002) has devoted some attention to formulating an ideological framework for the study of uncertainty and its reduction correlates that drastically changes its fundamental conception.

Since Baxter and Wilmot (1984), as well as Duck and Miele (1986), put forward that it is possible for individuals to have uncertainty regard-

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ing events, we propose that in order to test the boundaries of uncertainty and its reduction correlates, we must reach outside of its conventional hierarchical rules of relationship interactions to situational rules of action. Ultimately, the focus on a crisis situation where uncertainty arises has come to define the parameters of what the authors regard in this article as crisis uncertainty.

A crisis is generally referred to as a traumatic experience in the personal lives of individuals, and a “turning point for the worst” (Bergman, 1994). Crisis uncertainty can be defined as the ambiguity experienced surrounding the existence of a crisis. Communication researchers have managed to corner the market on researching crises in the workplace. Typically, the focus has been on developing procedures for managing the crisis (see Dougherty, 1992), or strategies to reduce uncertainty about the company. Very little is known about how individuals reduce or even manage their uncertainty about the incident in question as a developing model for identifying how individuals are affected by the crisis and manage to rebuild their lives as they attempt to position their lives as so much has changed politically, socially and interpersonally.

The present analysis focuses on such an issue and how individuals voice their perceptions and uncertainty related to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Crisis uncertainty is important to understanding an individual’s relationship between self and society where individuals draw on personal communication capital (Camara, 2002) to resolve events that may have permanently changed society. The term communication capital is derived from, but not related to, any specific economic model to reference information resources or any practices exercised to enable communication to enhance the self, however defined by the respondent. Communication capital includes drawing on different kinds of experiences, observations, media systems, emotions, expert opinions and other resources to inform researchers how individuals respond to situations, including critical and life altering events (Camara, 2002).

Therefore, this study has become a humanistic extension of the crisis communication research that illustrates an individual’s pivotal swing between self, other, society, and nation-state rather than an organization’s image or relationship interaction. The focus is on unexpected, painful and shocking adverse happenings that are experienced and perceived by those impacted by the events. We assume that what is experienced is more than unstable and will inherently exhibit uncertainty because the crisis has produced a radical change in the social lives of all US residents and the world within a short period of time.

**Crisis Communication Research**

Crisis communication is the process by which organizations use planning and decision-making strategies to respond to devastating events that could impact the organization in negative ways. Studies of crisis communication have traditionally been based on corrective action (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) restorative strategies (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998) and communication approaches used to analyze the crisis (Coombs, 1999, Fishman, 1999). Additionally, decision-making strategies (Allan 1990) and the type of extreme events that disrupt the lives of individuals, companies, nations and states (Kennedy, 1999) is also a focus of these studies. Much of the research on crisis includes natural disasters such as hurricanes or floods (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001), contaminated products (Slater & Wentz, 1999), commercial accidents (Fishman, 1999), terrorist bombings (Kiger, 2001), organizational bankruptcy or fraud (Shinkman, 1998), racial crises (Chisolm, 1998) and school crisis related to violence (Kennedy, 1999).

Rarely is there an opportunity proposed to understand how individuals process and experience the tragedy or trauma, whether they are directly or indirectly affected by it in some way. In order to do damage control and transform images and perceptions at the macro-level, one must attempt to understand, at some point, how individuals are impacted by the crisis/phenomenon on a micro-level. In the wake of 9/11, crisis communication specialists must begin asking questions about how individuals processed the attacks or the crisis. In other words, what were their needs? How have individuals been impacted directly or indirectly by the attacks? To overlook these specific questions could be detrimental to our communication interactions. Processing the incident is a crucial ingredient to understanding how to restore the public’s confidence when a crisis, like the terrorist attacks, occurs. The lack of theory and research makes it impossible to derive specific hypotheses for this study. Therefore, the following study was designed to address the following research question:

How were individuals impacted by the attacks on America on September 11, 2001?

**Method**

**Targeted population**

This study was conducted using a convenient sample of students attending and residents surrounding a mid-size private college in a Midwestern state. Participation was totally voluntary. The participants in the focus group were required to have no direct experience with the attacks (i.e. present in New York, DC or Pennsylvania on the day of the attacks or had a family member or friend who was a victim in or perpetrator of the attacks). This was the only restriction to the participants.

**The Study Planning**

This study began as a class project for a sophomore-level interviewing class. Students were trained for two weeks to become moderators for their final class project. The instructor for the class developed the focus
group (FG) questions, protocol, and recruitment script. Questions were pilot tested in class with students for clarity and cultural sensitivity. A basic demographic questionnaire was devised for participants to complete upon arrival to the focus group site. The target number for participants for each focus group was 3-5. One pilot focus group was conducted in class by the instructor and although it went well, it was not used in the final analysis. Focus groups were held at various locations across the college campus and were held on weekday evenings between the hours of 6:30-9:00 pm. Focus groups were limited to one full hour of talk. Food was provided at each focus group site and a total of 53 respondents participated.

Participants

Participants were 18 males and 35 females who ranged in age from 14 to 49 years (M=22.89 years, SD = 8.05); 39 were college students at a mid-size private college, 14 were non-college student community residents and of the 14 community residents, 6 were high school students. Regarding ethnicity, forty-five (45) of the respondents self-identified themselves as white/Caucasian, three (3) were black/African American and five (5) were international students from Uzbekistan and Armenia. The college sample was further distributed across year in school (13% were freshmen, 13% were sophomore, 13% were juniors, and 34% were seniors).

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted via face-to-face by students enrolled in the interviewing class. Students enrolled in the course were instructed to hand pick individuals they knew or had access to through fraternity, sorority, friendship, job or other membership affiliation to volunteer and participate in their class project. Participants were also told that the interviews would be video or audio taped. The instructor developed and provided the script for recruitment. Students were responsible for setting the date and time between 6:30 and 9:00 pm during the weekday to conduct the interview on campus. Participants who agreed to participate were reminded of the time, date, topic and place either by phone or through face-to-face encounter a week prior to the focus group meeting.

Moderating

Once volunteers were all present, they were asked, by the student moderator, to fill out a demographic form. The moderator greeted the participants, read aloud the script followed by an introduction of the topic, an explanation of the way focus groups work and established ground rules for discussion. The audio or video tape was turned on to begin the focus group. At the end of the focus group, participants were thanked and provided information on how to obtain a copy of the focus group session.

Analysis procedures for focus groups and themes

The analysis was transcription based and included the following stages: verbatim transcription of the audio and video tapes; and proof listening and editing (i.e. ensuring that the protocol was followed exactly). Although there are many ways to analyze the informant’s talk about his/her experiences (Maher, 1988; Spradley, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), a thematic analysis was used. The researchers focused on particular themes, attitudes, patterns of living and/or behavior. The ethnographic analysis performed in this study is based on Spradley’s (1979) six step process, which includes: (1) collecting data, (2) transcribing the talk and listing common ideas, (3) identifying the data related to catalogued patterns, (4) cataloguing more patterns into subcategories, (5) making a valid argument for themes and (6) formulating theme statements.

Eleven of the focus groups in this study utilized audiotapes and two utilized videotapes to collect the data and study the talk of the interview. Each focus group was transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy (reading the transcription, while listening or viewing tapes). Following the transcription all of the talk that related to specific categories were identified. Once the patterns were identified, they were expounded on. All of the talk that fit under a specific pattern was identified and placed with the corresponding pattern. Related patterns were further catalogued into sub-themes in an outline format, which led to what Taylor and Bogdan (1984) calls “conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs” (p.131). Themes that emerged from the respondents’ stories were collected together to form a comprehensive picture of their mutual experiences. A logical argument for choosing the themes was incorporated and connected to related literature to make inferences from the interviews. Finally, theme statements were formulated.

In the following pages, results from this process indicate that impacts of September 11 included but were not limited to forms of uncertainty surrounding the terrorist attacks, the use of communication capital to reduce that uncertainty, and negotiated identities of self and other.

Themes of September 11th Terrorist Attacks

Critical forms of disruption in crises

In a crisis, disruption may take many forms from a collapse of the economic system to a technological catastrophe or in the case of September 11, 2001, a terrorist attack. Respondents were able to articulate clearly how they perceived the terrorist attacks on 9/11. As participants responded,
we learned that the attack is considered a forerunner of uncertainty and goes beyond perceptions of social order and individual disruption.

There were three types of reservations that emerged in these focus groups. One was uncertainty about what was happening to America and who was responsible. Most people asked, “who could be responsible for such a horrific event.” Given the growing immigrant population in the US and active “extremist” groups from the U.S., there were some reservations about hastily asserting who was responsible for the acts of September 11th. Americans, perhaps, weren’t ready to make accusations about “cultural others” considering the bombing of the Murray Federal Building in Oklahoma that was carried out by Americans.

Expressing uncertainty was one theme associated with the attacks. One respondent reported, “When it first happened, we were not sure who did this to us. The thought was this is the beginning of World War III.” Other responses indicated that the incident could not be clearly understood because the information presented could not be confirmed. As another respondent stated in the interview, “I was unclear about what type of plane it was or if it even was a plane. Then I heard it was a propeller plane, and I heard it was a carrier plane.” A focus group of teenage students reported that they had no idea what the Pentagon was or what went on in the World Trade Center, “I just didn’t get it at all.” A 27-year-old respondent stated, “I didn’t even know who Osama Bin Laden was before 9/11.” These responses revealed a lack of historical knowledge on the part of Americans. The lack of knowledge of some respondents regarding American History, as well as US interactions with other nations, emerged in these focus groups. The increased feelings of uncertainty reported by American respondents could be influenced by history, topics of world affairs and current events.

The second type of reservation was skepticism of security, which grew out of rapid changes to the American travel and security measures forced on our society. Previous feelings of safety and security were replaced by perceptions of fear, shock, and incredulity. Our interviews were filled with narratives that spoke to fear. Respondents indicated that they were “afraid to fly somewhere.” The incident made them wonder about their “safety on a plane,” and they believed that “we [the US] were sitting ducks waiting to be killed.” An international student in one of the focus groups provided the following explanation of the disbelief of how this kind of devastation could occur in America:

It [the incident] changed my views on the US because before the bombings, I thought that the US was the safest place in the whole world because there was no war on its territory, but now...I don’t feel so safe as I used to and I’m scared to fly now.

Perhaps the false sense of security to which many respondents alluded can be attributed to the fact that Americans have long been shielded from the insecurities experienced as a part of daily life on the part of millions of people around the world. In fact, this was the worst incident of terrorism to happen to America on her own soil. The events of 9/11 exposed to the American people the vulnerability of America to attack. Some of the responses reveal the fact that American is irrevocably changed, left with feelings of insecurity, discomfort and vulnerability. Further, they reveal that the incident served as a warning to America and the world that America was not exempt from attack and the way in which people around the world have long lived. If Americans are to ever feel secure as a “free nation” again, much work will need to take place on a governmental level.

The third type of reservation is associated with the inability to predict what would happen. Berger and Calabrese (1975) pointed out that the source of understanding uncertainty enables one to sharpen prediction. In other words, the less ambiguity is experienced, the ability to predict increases. Because teen respondents could not predict that America would go to war, as if war was an inconceivable distant past that is no longer connected to how society functions, ambiguity must be in conflict with the necessity to predict. As one teen reveals in her statement, “I would have never guessed we would be in war. Cause you live in your perfect little world and now you are in war.” In all fairness, the level and type of uncertainty does not imply total lack of competency. Uncertainty may only illustrate lack of knowledge about military action versus personal action.

However, the cumulative effects of 9/11 are of central importance in understanding how a collective identity, forged and perceived, was also an uncertain and unpredictable event. Flags flew everywhere, people gave blood, volunteer acts sprung forth and “God Bless America” became the unofficial national anthem reconciling our nation to a higher calling. The heroic undertakings of firefighters and police officers in New York and the passengers aboard United Flight 93, who struggled with the terrorists and ultimately gave and sacrificed their lives in an effort to prevent the terrorists from flying the plane and crashing it into another building, redefined what it meant to be an American. The creation of heroic, legendary and iconic figures to symbolize the commitment of Americans to “fight for our way of life,” provided sources of inspiration for future generations. There are several responses that stand out above all others in understanding how unpredictable the attacks were in terms of developing and shaping national pride:

I can tell you what I didn’t predict. I never would have predicted Americans would be this patriotic. I personally made unity ribbons and my co-workers donated $400 dollars to the Red Cross.
I was all about free Tibet, I was into this Tibet thing for the past 5-10 years of my life, so I guess I wasn’t thinking about the US until this happened, and now I have the flag stuck on my car. So, I think that it [9/11] has impacted my life and made me stop and think that I really do love to be here, and I really love our life and I don’t want anyone to come in and hurt it. Before, I wasn’t thinking that this could happen.

I feel the same way. I have a little flag sticker for my car too. I have also taken greater interest in the US…I went on the Internet and did some research and then I figured out all this stuff.

This new sense of patriotism is not an unpredictable response to the events of 9/11, especially given the rhetoric espoused by President Bush and other government officials. Soon after the speculation had arisen that the events could be attributed to Osama bin Laden and members of the Taliban, President George W. Bush declared a “war on terrorism.” As is the case during times of war, propaganda fuels a heightened sense of patriotism, which often incites people to action. The president’s declaring the attacks as a “war on our way of life” and the American response as a “war on terrorism,” can largely be attributed to the feelings of increased patriotism expressed by the respondents.

Using postmodern communication channels to reduce uncertainty

Atkins (1985) argued that individuals may seek and consume media information to reveal a certain goal. The actions of the respondents noted in these focus groups illustrates that respondents tended to draw on a variety of mediums for updates, as reference points for assessing the situation and reducing their uncertainty about the attacks. News of this national trauma tended to be communicated very rapidly, not only by the news media, but also by the exchange of information at the interpersonal level. Telephone lines and cellular towers frequently became overloaded with the large number of calls as people reached out for support and information.

The media, with television, radio and Internet as the primary information channels, were used in a myriad of ways. First, the media were used to help resolve questions. One respondent stated that, “TV pretty much clarified who did it and why?” Second, the media were used as a means of revealing truth. Many stated that they didn’t believe what was happening when another person told them, but the facts were authenticated when they heard it in the media. Another respondent stated that a friend told her that all of New York had been destroyed. She stated, “I ran down stairs to watch the news and I found out that only the World Trade Center was bombed and not the whole New York was gone.” Third, the media were able to construct meaning of the past and anticipate the future actions of the US. Because coverage went on for days, respondents got a clear picture of what the response of the United States would be.

At the same time, there were reports that the coverage seemed surreal. One respondent stated that, “It just felt like a movie. It was so weird I think everybody thought it was kind of unreal….but when you watch the footage, it’s just like it really happened.” Others believe that the newscasters may have created more confusion about the incident than what was necessary. For example, one female respondent stated that, “I think they were guessing and they weren’t sure.” Others in the same focus group stated that they believed the media were hesitant because of Oklahoma City. The respondent stated that, “they jumped on the Middle-East terrorist so fast they wanted everybody. It turned out to be some Joe from out in Cornville.”

Although Generation X has been raised on action-packed desensitizing films of Hollywood, and many respondents felt as if the live broadcast was scripted, the media were a stool pigeon for gathering information and clarifying facts and events. Even if the official news sources were perceived to be inadequate or regarded as untrustworthy, individuals began to formulate their own questions in an attempt to make events coherent. Under these conditions, individuals did not react as separate entities, but in collaboration with the media in the quest for understanding the attacks. Through mass communication, millions of people became aware of much more than they could experience through interpersonal contacts. The happenings of New York City, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC were brought into the homes, workplaces, schools, and lives of millions of people. In this respect the terrorist attacks were not isolated. Respondents sought the media in order to better predict what would happen next.

Foretelling experiences of 9/11

Predicting the behavior of self and others is an important part of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The ability to predict the behavior of others assumes that action has been taken to resolve ambiguity. Many respondents were able to predict what was happening to America and why. The following responses illustrate how individuals perceive how the world works when they are confused. One respondent stated, “Well I hate to be negative, but I saw it coming.” Another respondent also stated, “Yeah, I felt bad, but I was just waiting for what would happen. I kind of foresaw it.” These foreseen acts were also accompanied by causal explanations. Without them, the events of 9/11 would appear to be random and chaotic. Respondents constructed a coherent picture of events to promote an understanding, even if erroneous, of the terrorist attacks:
causal explanations that positioned American politics as underhanded, full of schemes and plots, as the way the system works. Thus, 9/11 was considered a root cause and result of those dirty dealings and American citizens and non-citizens were left feeling the backlash of the event. As the events continued to be addressed in a conspiratorial tone, other members began to discuss the emotional impacts the attacks had on their lives.

**Emotional exposure and feelings of pride**

Emotions are also experienced when individuals experience high levels of uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1988) or any life-altering event. But studies examining uncertainty suggest that as uncertainty increases, individuals experience negative emotions (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Our respondents tapped into these automatic responses that showed up as underlying thoughts. Their emotions simply grew out of what it means to be human. The question used to elicit emotional responses was open-ended, thus helping us to conclude that the 9/11 attacks evoked intense levels of emotions individually and collectively. As respondents identified their emotions through words, respondents identified how the effortlessness of their everyday movement was put on hold and replaced by overwhelming sadness, fear, and anger. One international student reported that she thought that, “The September 11th events were just the beginning of horror. The terrorist might have had a list of duties to accomplish and the World Trade Centers was just the beginning of World War III.” Another respondent reported that what upset him the most was not fear but that “people think they can use religion to justify taking other peoples lives and taking something so sacred to a whole group of people and use it against another group for political reasons.”

Other emotional responses following the attack on America, involved collective anger directed toward Middle Easterners living in America. The Muslim community was the most readily available target for venting a collective sense of rage and hostility about the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Collective anger took the form of widespread profiling of other ethnic individuals that resembled the terrorist. The facets of cultural tolerance in the social realm broke down as resentments became expressed in violent action as a method of getting justice since anger represents experiencing an injustice. One respondent stated that it was very upsetting to hear that in a certain area of the city where one store employed a lot of Indian-like people, the guests were being rude to the immigrant cashiers saying, “Hurry up. Why can’t you do this right?”

Other responses, of sufficient magnitude, left individuals feeling that they had experienced serious psychological impacts. One respondent identified recurrent nightmares right after 9/11. She stated, “I had nightmares about bin Laden for a week. Even though bin Laden is in another country, it felt like he was right around the corner.” Another respondent reported the difficulty of concentrating on everyday tasks, “My brother,
who was in the World Trade Center at that time, whenever he sees a plane in the sky, I can see horror in his eyes when a plane passes.” Others reported that they were in total “disbelief” that this could actually happen in the US and that they were “shocked” about the events that happened. These responses may not indicate the degree of emotions felt, but it certainly indicates that there was an emotional impact.

Moreover, notions about “who we are” and “what we are to become” are shaped to a large degree from feelings of pride that grew out of extraordinary accounts of heroism and extraordinary deeds by people involved directly and indirectly in the 9/11 attacks. One respondent stated that she felt a new sense of “pride” in being an American while coping with the changing conditions in society, responding to the changes that are occurring within us, and elaborating on the meanings 9/11 will now have for the lives of Americans. In effect, many respondents perceived 9/11 as a living historical moment in which Americans will endorse freedom and stand up for the right to enjoy that freedom while re-inventing their futures as they connect these events to the not so distant past.

Relying on past experiences for historical knowledge

The context of past experiences is intended to assist in understanding how this event links to a similar event or with a crisis or traumatic experience. Responses to 9/11 have meaning for international students and civil rights era born individuals versus post-civil rights era born individuals. A temporal dimension is reflected in respondents perceiving how we got to where we are now and where we are headed as we move into the future. Honeycutt (1993) argues that past experiences play a key role in uncertainty levels. The premise is when individuals can recall similar experiences uncertainty is intensely low. This argument suggests that individuals can increase their prediction levels. Differences in responses raised important issues about a historical knowledge gap between American youth and international youth and American youth and American adults.

The following illustrates how past experiences affect one’s processing of uncertainty. One international respondent recalled an earthquake in Armenia that devastated hundreds of residents, but was clear that the earthquake was a natural phenomenon and that the attack on American was organized by people to kill people. A second international respondent recalled a series of bombings in Moscow a couple of years back. The group began dialoguing and clarifying that the terrorist group attacking America was not the same group attacking Russia because Russia was in war with Chechnya at the time and so Chechnya terrorists were responsible for organizing those bombings. International students connected the incident of 9/11, to personally lived experiences or incidents related to certain geographic regions of the world. One respondent’s experience in Uzbekistan stood out:

In Tashkent in 1999 we did have several bombings in the center of the capital. Our central bank and 2 blocks of apartments were almost erased by the deeds of those terrorist; I believe the same group of people [9/11 terrorist] did that.

Moreover, a perceived knowledge of past experiences can be real or imagined. A real experience is recalled as direct experience or knowledge. An imagined experience doesn’t refer to an unreal incident, but a causal rationalization of the actions and steps taken by the US to reduce internal economic wars and to produce a thriving economy. American adults, whom had traveled or have an extensive knowledge of political dealings in other countries, connected 9/11 to wars like the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War or other recent bombing attempts on the World Trade Center. Civil rights era born respondents reported the following examples to illustrate American imperialism in other countries:

If you look at Vietnam you would think, why in the world did we ever go and fight in Vietnam? It’s because Vietnam is the only place in the world where you can find live rubber. It’s the largest stock in the world and we live on live rubber. Live rubber makes most of our products. We need a base of live rubber. How extreme will our government go to protect a money issue? They’ll go to any extreme. They’ll send our sons and daughters over there to fight for the protection of the money.

A lot of nations have nothing and we just keep taking what they have from them either by shady bargaining or by force. We [the US] do everything for our own economic interest and it goes back to an American state of imperialism. When the boxer rebellion happened in China we shut it down. Not just us Americans, but a bunch of European countries got together and shut it down to protect the economic interest. In the Philippines, the islands wanted their freedom from America after they were supposed to get their freedom from Spain. We shut down all of those resolutions to keep up our economic interests.

The more seasoned adult focus group explored and debated how America created an adversarial relationship with the Middle East. Within this logic, the 9/11 bombings aren’t justified, but they are understood as a continued conflict between the US and the Middle East. No matter how distorted these speculative ideas appear, what is truly exposed is the lack of historical knowledge among America’s youth and young adult population when compared to international and immigrant students. To further complicate matters, historical knowledge gaps reflect ineffective inter-
personal and intercultural interactions, international conflict and a lack of cultural competence. American youth from the post-civil rights era, commonly referred to as Generation X, could not associate the events of 9/11 to past situations, events or encounters. A few respondents referred to Desert Storm, but most were not able to embrace history as a stock of knowledge for connecting the past to the present to the future.

Negotiating cultural similarity-dissimilarity to shifting worldviews

Gudykunst (1985b) argues that uncertainty is further impacted by perceived similarity. If individuals see themselves as similar to others or share the same cultural values, uncertainty is low. However, if uncertainty is high, lack of perceived similarity may be influencing uncertainty outcomes. Respondents reported often that there was a disconnection from them and the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks. Very few reported that they found similarities between themselves and the perpetrators, but when they did, they mentioned that they could empathize with Muslims believing in something enough to defend it.

On the other hand, others reported a desire for some kind of action in response to the 9/11 attacks. Three outcomes substituted for venting and reflected the frustrations and perceptions of commonality between Americans and the terrorists. One outcome of negotiating similarity involved physical threats. Camara (2002) asserts that fear tactics are often utilized as a form of confrontation in racist interactions. These threats can be played out symbolically and physically. Threats were introduced physically as an outgrowth of social outrage. One respondent reported that, “someone broke into my roommate’s home and threw something through the window because her family practiced the Muslim faith.”

A second outcome of negotiating commonality was acted out in racial profiling. Although not a new phenomena, racial profiling, like stereotyping, is characterized as constraining and limiting one’s movement based on phenotypic descriptors (Camara, 2002). Just as historical circumstances in the post-Reconstruction South (Jim Crow laws, vagrancy laws, Ku Klux Klan vigilantes) initiated the profiling of African Americans, the September 11th attacks has provided a foundation for profiling Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern people. One respondent stated that he worked at a local radio station. He described the station as, “the hotbed of racism; the worst of the worst.” He goes on to illustrate how the stigma of racism is already in place:

On open phones on Saturdays anybody can call in and anybody does. You get some people on there that say I don’t understand why we just don’t bomb all the towel heads back into the stone ages. While we’re at it, we should take out the chinks and the spicks… what have they done for us?

Other respondents admitted that they had a heightened level of racial awareness when in contact with others. As one respondent stated, “My mother told me that if I saw one of them [an Arab or Muslim], just get off the plane.” Another respondent revealed hypothetically that if she was walking down the street and saw an Arab or someone of Arab descent, she would have to take a second guess.

During an in-depth television interview on C-SPAN2 in December 2002, Harvard cultural critic, Cornel West, compared the profiling of Muslims and Arabs and the uncertainty Americans felt to being “niggardized.” In other words, the hatred toward the cultural other, and the sense of fear, hate and lack of faith in America’s security system, is all too familiar to African Americans living in America. The Muslim and Arab community and non-black Americans were experiencing what most African Americans live daily as a result of racial intolerance and lack of respect that has led to unfair practices such as racism and discrimination as a backdrop for these demonstrative experiences.

A third outcome was in the form of name-calling. Camara (2002) notes that name-calling is considered the most commonly reported type of racist message among interracial interactants who perceived that they had been involved in a racist interaction. Camara further argues that the continuance of this behavior dismisses the impact name-calling has on future interactions, thus allowing the behavior to become significant in the social realm of acceptability and enabling its effectivity, which is clear in the names listed in the focus groups to describe Muslims and Middle Eastern peoples (i.e. “towel heads,” “camel jockey,” “sand niggers,” “Sons of Osama bin Ladders,” and “Ahab the Arab”). Most respondents stated that they heard others use racial terms, but they themselves did not use the term. One respondent went as far to say that she was “not a racist” but she heard others using the terms. Out of all focus groups, only one person admitted that he used racially charged terms to describe Arabs, but at the same time, he acknowledged that he knew it was wrong to do so.

Although respondents would not admit to using racial epithets, they had no problem listing names they’ve heard others use to describe Arab and Muslim people. Interestingly, respondents were quick to defend any feelings, attitudes and beliefs that they personally had towards people of Arab descent that was negative. This display of defensiveness may have materialized out of guilt causing respondents to, in part, re-negotiate their worldview of the other in interaction. Diggins and Clark (at press) and Jackson (1999) argue that this is part of the negotiating identity paradigm and although respondents were not negotiating their identities, they were negotiating something.

Jackson’s (2003) cultural contract theory would argue that name-calling, physical threats, profiling and the perception of similarity/dissimilarity could be applied, in part, to the negotiating identity paradigm. Jackson’s theory argues that individuals shift their level of tolerance
through developing contracts with others whom they come in contact. The first contract is the *ready to sign contract*, which says we expect people to act like we act. The second contract is the *quasi-completed contract*, which is accepting some aspects of individuals and rejecting others. The third contract is the *no contract*, which is complete rejection. The quasi-completed contract best describes the respondents in this focus group and their interactions, thoughts and beliefs about what they do or do not have in common with Arab and Muslim people.

Respondents on the receiving end were very disappointed in how they were treated because of their religious practices. One respondent noted that he was constantly asked where he was from after the terrorist attacks and when he answered, "Uzbekistan," he noticed how facial expressions would change as if he was the enemy. Having an Arabic or Muslim cultural identity can be extremely dangerous when culture is relegated to physical characteristics. Because of a specific group of individuals responsible for the destruction of life and their association to a particular faith, the entire religious group will be victims of discrimination, harassment, racial and religious profiling for years to come.

*II. Impacts on self, society, and others*

Within this contextual framework, the uncertainty of respondents reflects the connections between self, other, and society. Self-contained units of meanings are influenced by September 11, 2001. Respondents have developed self-awareness to provide an immediate resolution of their experience with terrorism. One respondent stated that, "It just made me more aware of what’s going on around me. I tell people how I feel and I make sure that I am enjoying my time and my life because there were so many innocent people that were going about their daily routine and look what happened."

Most people understand that this event has a broader meaning for social life. The causes of the trauma will be reflected in our daily lives and the way that we have known freedom will never be the same. One respondent illustrated her understanding of how society has been impacted and how we can never forget 9/11 based on the mandated social changes. The respondent believes that she has to talk about it a lot even though she doesn’t want to because, "Everything that’s happening right now is happening because of September 11, 2001." This event has represented more than what respondents experienced individually, but collectively.

The relationship between crisis phenomena, the individual, and the collective illustrates the direct and indirect impacts of 9/11. One respondent stated, "I was on the phone talking with my family when I heard my friend’s roommate across the hall scream because his brother was on the 9th floor of the Towers." This response demonstrates how the phenomenon of 9/11 had both an individual and collective, direct and indirect impact on most people in America. The experience reported by the respondent of hearing his friend’s roommate scream was echoed by many people who did not lose someone they knew or loved in the tragedy, but knew someone who lost a loved one. This sentiment was echoed across America on the news, in chat rooms and in everyday conversations. Soon, those lost came to be referred to as collective American “sons and daughters,” which of course made the lost appear more personal and certainly gave the nation a sense of collective loss.

**Discussion/Conclusion**

Before discussing the meaning of the current findings relative to crisis uncertainty, two points must be attended to: First, uncertainty and its reduction correlates have not been used in crisis communication research up to this point. Uncertainty reduction is primarily used to study relationship interactions and information seeking behavior used to predict the behavior of others or to develop cognitively (Berger, 2000). However, understanding individual uncertainty in crisis is just as important and is a necessary application to extend uncertainty in a variety of contexts rather than a misapplication because it reaches outside the boundaries of face-to-face interactions. Such an extension contributes to our understanding of the effects uncertainty during crisis has on face-to-face interactions. The responses in this study demonstrate that types of uncertainty were present in the focus group discussions, but the actual source of uncertainty reduction was not clearly identifiable, as is the case in traditional uncertainty research.

Second, quantitative data measuring context specific crisis uncertainty as a function of a constructed scale should be developed for the sake of reliability in future research. It is reasonable to think that uncertainty plays a significant role in crisis situations and that it would vary based on context, as suggested by Gudykunst (1988) and the crisis type. Understanding how individuals process uncertainty of the crisis in order to manage it in theory and in practice is important to future research endeavors related to communication because one’s perception can easily become one’s reality and one’s reality can easily be one’s perception.

Current findings expand research on uncertainty reduction and suggest that uncertainty is experienced in a variety of contexts other than interpersonal interactions. According to Planalp and Honeycutt (1985) there are a variety of events that increase uncertainty in personal relationships. Though events like terrorist attacks are not mentioned, current results indicate that terrorism can play an important role in how individuals continue to build and develop relationships with cultural others and strangers. More than two-thirds of the respondents reported that the events caused some uncertainty about the security of America and Middle Eastern or Islamic peoples. Respondents reported that the uncertainty experienced...
caused fear, profiling of, and a negative reaction toward Arabic or Arabic looking individuals.

Although previous treatments of uncertainty generally view uncertainty as a social crisis that individuals seek to reduce to ensure interaction with others (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), the treatment of uncertainty due to an event, such as terrorism, elicits attention to and reliance on the media. The media played an important role in how respondents reduced uncertainty. Although respondents reported that they primarily sought the media to clarify who did what, when, where, with what effects, and why, their reliance on the media illustrated how important its function and role was during the attacks. What is clearly understood here is that individuals were able to confirm, deny, and dispel myths about what happened and who was responsible. Thus, getting clarification on who was responsible impacted interactions between certain groups of people in the United States directly or indirectly related to the terrorist group. Because uncertainty about terrorism has relational consequences, it is reasonable to assume that crisis uncertainty could occupy a central position in uncertainty reduction research.

Perhaps of greater interest to the findings of this study are the responses revealing that the terrorist attacks did not draw out uncertainty. It is clear that past experiences (Honeycutt, 1993) and expectations (Douglas, 1991) in the responses of International students and the adult focus group respectively is consistent with previous research on orientations of uncertainty. According to Honeycutt (1993), when individuals can recall similar experiences uncertainty is intensely low. Although uncertainty was not low in International students’ belief that the US was the safest place in the world, for example, International students were certain of these attacks having a social and personal connection to their own lives. International students could make connections that American students were not able to make based on past experiences and historical knowledge of terrorist acts in or near their own countries. The assumption that Douglas (1991) makes about expected interactions is that when interactions are anticipated, information about others is capitalized on. In the case of the non-student, adult focus group, the group was able to connect American dealings in other countries and attribute those dealings to the causal behavior that led to the terrorist attacks based on travel experiences. The adult group, more than any other focus group, used causal arguments to make sense of the events of September 11th.

In sum, the current findings illustrate that uncertainty and one’s ability to reduce uncertainty can be effective in the wake of a social crisis just as it has been in interpersonal interactions. These results should not be taken to suggest that uncertainty reduction outside of its normal context is less effective. A social crisis can bring about higher levels of uncertainty between individuals than in initial interactions or pre-existing relationships.

This leads to several suggestions for future research on crisis communication and the incorporation of interpersonal communication theories. Since the present research focuses on the ways that respondents experienced and processed uncertainty of the September 11th attacks, these perceptions cannot be generalized to actual behavior in all crisis situations. One of the first concerns is to extend this exploratory study to a comparison of other crises. From results of this study, when combined with Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) study, hypotheses can be generated and examined. For example, the authors noted that more interaction produces increased predictability. International students in this study reported dealing with terrorist attacks more often than Americans, thus they were more competent and aware of predicting terrorist behavior and connecting the September 11th events to other societal forces. Extending uncertainty to include an examination of crisis is a concern for future studies.

Another area where future research can extend the present investigation on crisis communication is in terms of the population studied. Although there were 11 focus groups of college students, one group of teenagers, and one group of career adults, there are obvious problems with generalizability of research studying mostly students. Future research could and should focus on individuals in the workforce who were on the frontlines of the crisis (government workers, airport personnel, media etc).

A third area of concern for future work is including information seeking behavior. Drawing upon Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) three types of information seeking behaviors (i.e., active, passive, and interactive) and Camara’s (2002) intra-active self-interrogation style, distinct research questions might be specified. Respondents in this study not only experienced uncertainty that caused them to question the government, and their own personal safety in the US, but their interactions with others were affected. The degree to which the historical background of the crisis is known is also part of the extension.

One final area of future research lies in the development on cultural interactions. The implications for information seeking can lead to issues related to cultural similarity and dissimilarity. As the study indicated, there was an increase in profiling and stereotyping of foreign citizens. Additionally, this research might predict what happens when people are from different cultures or races with respect to how they are impacted and affected or how identities are negotiated and developed in interactions related to the crisis. This research could focus on how people define the crisis, experience uncertainty and reduce it. As indicated in the study, international students relied heavily on the past experiences with terrorism in their own country or geographic areas close to their country of origin to predict what would happen next.

This paper concludes like many others, suggesting that further research needs to be conducted for reliability and validity. The ethnographic
approach taken to collect data and the thematic analysis utilized in this paper is a productive method for future research. Uncertainty, both in day-to-day interactions and associated with events/happenings is an important component in crisis communication research. Communication scholars have an obligation and a unique opportunity to explore the nature of talk that surrounds crisis situations in a variety of contexts.

Through these focus group interviews, we understand that there were extreme actions taken toward terrorism that changed American ways of travel. The shock of the terrorist attacks touched the entire nation and elicited a more intense emotional response that resulted in confusion for some and fear for others. Yet, patriotic attitudes has helped to connect and heal Americans. The 9/11 events will and have become ingrained in the collective memory and provide a reference point to draw upon in the future. As we develop and extend our understanding of crisis communication, we increase our chances of understanding the impacts of a crisis, the inherent uncertainty of that crisis and how to teach others to reduce that uncertainty.

References
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