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A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RISK AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT SKILLS

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Received 14 March 2023; accepted 30 June 2023; published 30 July 2023

**Abstract.** The primary concern of this article is to review the knowledge and ability of people to act to protect themselves and others in the face of various risks and hazards, and to manage accident and crisis situations. Relevant issues include the needs and requirements of emergency situations, people's ability to respond to them, and factors that affect coping ability. The selected sub-areas are practice-oriented and defined in terms of real-world problems rather than theories or scientific concepts. One of the purposes of choosing to structure the review of risk, accident and crisis management psychology in this way is to emphasize the importance of human limitations and capabilities as an element in all areas of activity and responsibility. This approach, in turn, assumes that the review contains a broad theoretical base and multifaceted approaches, which are necessarily treated here rather generically.

**Keywords:** crisis management; human capabilities; psychology; risk

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Szafrńska, K., Trocha, J., Małachowska, E. 2023. A psychological perspective on risk and crisis management skills. *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*, 13, 181-186. <https://doi.org/10.47459/jssi.2023.13.19>

**JEL Classifications:** I2

## 1. Introduction

The article deals with a broad area of knowledge that focuses on the human capacity to prepare for and manage various risks, hazards and crisis situations. It covers both the conditions and circumstances of the general public and professional entities, from a behavioral and mainly psychological perspective.

With such a broad view, the goal cannot be to present a comprehensive picture of research in the field, the presentation lacks many important sub-areas. One goal is to address the broader area of human capabilities was to identify common problems and opportunities for mutual inspiration. One impression from working on the review is that there is a need to build bridges and apply theory and empirics not only between disciplines, but also between different fields of knowledge. For example, the risk literature and the crisis literature have largely followed separate tracks, although some bridging efforts are now beginning to emerge.

Similarly, research on psychological factors affecting society's ability to cope with crises also has implications for professional actors.

Perceptions of risk, perceptions of vulnerability and personal action are also important to how a crisis planner acts in his or her professional role. Individual and conditions for dealing with different situations are influenced by expectations and the framework created by society. Nor do professional actors operate in a social vacuum (although the literature on crises can sometimes give that impression). They are influenced by expectations and, among other things, the media's portrayal of the crisis. Looking at the field from a broader perspective can therefore provide new questions and viewpoints.

## 2. Man in a risk society: old and new problems

Part of the knowledge of human behavior in relation to risk and crisis concerns basic mechanisms and conditions that can be considered relatively universal and similar between generations and cultures. It may concern ways of perceiving and responding to immediate danger or coping strategies for dealing with stress. However, an underlying feature is also the drive to adapt behavior to new conditions and contexts as the individual perceives them. The future risk and threat landscape is uncontroversial and impossibly unpredictable. However, we can point to a number of changes in the human-society relationship that we can identify today that affect the ability to manage risk in the future society (Sarkar, Osiyevskyy, 2018; Wysokińska-Senkus, Górna, 2021).

One such change is the increasing flow of information about risks. Citizens are accessing and surrounded by more and more information about sources of risk and trade-offs between risks from various sources, through the media, etc. However, our knowledge of how people today sort and prioritize information flows is insufficient. There is a danger in the social debate that people are overreacting (Zhou, Brown, 2019), and there is talk of over-seeking reassurance in the “land of security junkies” (Kim et al., 2019).

However, it can be noted that if some people become deeply concerned, contact the authorities or appear in the media, it is noted. However, it is less common for people to become passive or “give up” in the face of insecurity and sometimes conflicting information about various possible threats over which they feel they have no control.

Thus, there is now also reason to reflect on the phenomenon of “risk fatigue.” Another development concerns diversity and a heterogeneous society, the implications of which in Salvador and Ikeda highlight well (Salvador, Ikeda, 2018). To the extent that we can expect society to develop toward greater diversity, more groups with different values and experiences, and a greater degree of decentralization, this should lead to risk and danger. Another factor in favor of heterogeneity in risk perception is the supposed increase in diffuse and uncertain risks. The more diffuse and difficult to interpret the risk picture, the greater the range of different possible future scenarios is the social tendency toward greater inequality among different groups in terms of vulnerability, information about and control over risks.

At least in developed countries, there is also a shift in the demands on society in terms of risk management capabilities and in the way these demands are expressed. People are less inclined to attribute accidents to chance or fate. There is a growing tendency to seek human explanations for what happens, which includes prosecutions and scapegoating for serious accidents. Another consequence is that the public expects authorities and decision-makers to manage risks. The public sector has also taken on a more prominent role in the recovery process after serious incidents, such as victim support, etc.

At the same time, there is a growing debate about how different perceptions and values of citizens can or should be taken into account in society’s management of risk and security issues (Wojcik, 2022). Overall, the requirements seem to be growing, and the actors who can contribute and interact are becoming more numerous.

The various roles of actors to meet and manage the risks and threats of modern society will be increasingly in the spotlight. According to Osiyevskyy and others (Sarkar, Osiyevskyy, 2018), the key challenge lies in the ability to coordinate, organize and assign appropriate roles to different actors at the international, national and local levels. They also point to a number of dilemmas and value judgments with ethical and political implications. One such trade-off is the balance between a sense of security and trust in the system and, at the same time, the necessary vigilance against possible dangers and threats. Individuals are, of course, important actors in ensuring the security of themselves and their loved ones.

Some security measures are obvious, while others are difficult for most people to imagine. Taking action is not just about knowing the dangers. Some behaviors may have more to do with routine and personal approach

rather than risk awareness. How a person perceives the responsibilities between the individual and actors in society may be another factor influencing how they act. Some researchers warn that individuals are often over-estimating the ability of people to take responsibility for security (Rogozńska-Mitrut, 2010). The view of the value of safety and security may also differ from one group to another. It is therefore very relevant to the question of what individuals can and want to contribute to the security of society.

With the new emergency management system, it has become clearer what requirements are made and what is expected of local and regional level actors in terms of building and good emergency management preparedness and capacity. Attention, not least from the media in connection with several events in recent years has also contributed to the focus on the capacity for good crisis management. Crisis management studies highlight the challenges facing decision-makers at all levels in relation to current and future crisis events. A rather difficult picture emerges, with the question of whether the task of “mission impossible” (Enander et al., 2010), crisis planning is criticized as often more fantasy than reality (Fearn-Banks, 2017), and the ability to learn from experience is questioned (Kim et al., 2019).

The need for a new approach to management has been identified, with less emphasis on written plans and routine exercises and more emphasis on learning processes and skill development and mental preparation of leaders (Nusinov, 2016). Although organizations are formally responsible for risk and crisis event management, among other things, the importance of individuals, decision-makers and leaders is never lost sight of.

Risk and crisis event management is about addressing the source of the problem - including fire, flood, toxic spill or whatever - but it is equally about managing people’s responses to the risk/event. In Sweden, the need for the ability to respond to the different needs of individuals and groups became very clear in the context of events such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the sinking of the ship *m/s Estonia*, the fire in Gothenburg’s Macedonia, and the 2004 tsunami.

The government’s public safety and preparedness bills emphasize the importance of the country’s top leadership, as well as other operational managers, to act in a way that shows that the public cares about the and those affected by the disaster. Meeting this requires knowledge of the support needs that arise for different groups in the context of different events, and how such support can best be designed and implemented.

### **3. Interactions between risk/crisis managers in society (professional actors) and the individual**

The role of the risk/crisis manager is often considered from a communications perspective, where it is pointed out that an important task is to communicate and support society. In this context, it is emphasized that individual citizens should be more involved in risk and security issues, be made aware of risks and encouraged to take security measures. The importance of motivation and communication skills is emphasized.

The literature, based on an individual perspective, emphasizes issues of trust, trust in authorities and what is required for an individual citizen to engage and actively contribute. It emphasizes issues of trust, confidence and responsibility. Issues of interaction between professional actors in society and society are thus considered “from both sides.” The central issue can be traced back to Osiyevskyy et al. (Sarkar, Osiyevskyy, 2018) and the challenge of assigning and coordinating the roles of different actors. At this level, these issues are addressed in the context of risk management (Vid, 2016; Rak et al., 2022), but brought down to specific actions and the individual/group level, this area is still little explored.

On the one hand, the role of citizens in social risk and crisis management issues has increased in recent years. This is mainly about “involving” the public as participation in decision-making, dialogue and communication. According to Vida, the question is no longer whether the public should be taken into account, but, as he points out, three areas in which the public should be particularly important: in the selection of criteria for what is acceptable or not; in the trade-offs between different criteria; and in the development of strategies for dealing with persistent uncertainty (Vid, 2016).

At issue is how much consideration should be given to intuitive risk assessments made by laypeople during social decision-making processes. Vid summarized some of the arguments for and against. The arguments against largely deal with psychological and social influences and variability factors as sources of error. Rather, the arguments in favor emphasize that all evaluations have a subjective element, and therefore there may be power for society, from the standpoint of quality and fairness, if differences in perception can be accommodated (Vid, 2016).

Another potential forum for public participation is participation as a party in the development of preparedness by public authorities and other key players in risk and emergency management, decision makers and other stakeholders are keen to highlight public information and citizen response management as particularly difficult but important issues. Through active participation in exercises, citizens can help clarify needs and interpretations from the perspective of being the recipient of risk and crisis communications. Approaches to testing this type of participation have proven effective (Fearn-Banks, 2017) and can be further developed.

Another issue concerns the opposite problem when it comes to activating people to take action for themselves and others, and convincing them to participate constructively in society's collective risk and crisis management efforts (e.g., environmental action, preparing for power outages, etc.). A distinction is made here between problems where people do not know or understand the risk, and problems where, for various reasons they choose to ignore the threat after all. Misguided expectations, lack of resources and over-reliance on authority figures can contribute to the latter problem, sometimes referred to as "public complacency" (Nusinov, 2016).

The increased interest in questions of responsibility and roles can also be attributed to the aftermath of 9/11, when ethical questions about the balance between individual privacy and government responsibility for security.

#### **4. Acting in accordance with social expectations**

In the interaction between society and the individual, it is also interesting to examine how decision-makers themselves view their responsibilities and society's expectations. A study of emergency planners in Oklahoma, for example, shows that they are very aware of societal expectations (in this case, storm and hurricane preparedness) and to some extent align their actions with these expectations. There are also dilemmas, such as false alarms and the choice between being criticized for unnecessary warnings or not giving adequate warning (Avery et al., 2010). A more fundamental question is how local and regional leaders are influenced by public opinion and expectations.

In the context of emergency management, for example, leaders pointed to the danger of being controlled by the media and taking actions more to satisfy expectations than because they are actually needed (Tworzydło, 2022). Related issues concern the extent of the public's responsibility to support individuals in crisis situations.

Another perspective concerns the expectations and beliefs of decision-makers about society. Wooten & James (Wooten, James, 2008) emphasize as the first guiding principle in the development of emergency planning that it should be based on sound knowledge of risk/threat and human response. It is the latter aspect that can break down, and such deficiencies can have far-reaching consequences. Behavioral research on crises has helped dispel many popular myths about how people behave in collective stress situations. Examples of such myths, according to Fearn-Banks (Fearn-Banks, 2017), are that people flee in panic, are completely helpless and reliant on the authorities for help, rush to public shelters to provide as much care as possible, and that looting and anti-social behavior are common.

The prevalence of myths and misconceptions about how people behave in difficult situations can be an obstacle to good planning and effective action in many ways (Coombs, 2015; Grega, Nečas, 2022). Authorities fearful of panic, for example, may be reluctant to provide information or delay it unnecessarily. Such action makes it more difficult to continue managing a difficult situation, because people are less likely to follow advice and instructions when they feel the information they receive is unclear or incomplete (Enander et al., 2010). According to several researchers, the handling of Hurricane Katrina can be seen as a drastic example of the detrimental effect of myths on the way a crisis is defined and managed.

“Metaphors Matter,” Alas et al. (Alas et al., 2010) point to a number of misconceptions and perceptions about human behavior that, according to the authors, shaped authorities’ actions during the hurricane. Myths of helplessness, irrationality and panic made up the picture that led, among other things, to cooperation and voluntary actions, to people refusing to evacuate for fear of having their homes looted, and to the diversion of resources that could have been used to exert various forms of control. Perhaps most seriously, this attitude has contributed to conflicts between authorities/organizations and victims.

Interaction between different professional groups is a recurring theme throughout the crisis management system. The conditions for good interaction between authorities and the public at different stages of critical situations and events have not been highlighted to a greater extent. There is a clear need for interdisciplinary efforts to analyze such conditions as responsibilities, duties and legal considerations, ethical dilemmas, etc. From a behavioral science perspective, it can be emphasized that:

- expectations and beliefs. Empirical research on how both decision-makers and the public perceive their own and others’ responsibilities in different areas should be important knowledge, as well as how different factors can influence these perceptions and the implications for action on both sides,
- myths. crisis plans based on false expectations of human behavior are doomed to failure. Analyzing the explicit and implicit expectations contained in policy documents, formal and informal plans, and the actions of decision makers can be a way to make misconceptions visible and check misconceptions and unrealistic plans. It should also be noted that analyses of past management performance can provide such experience.

## 5. Summary and conclusions

The knowledge review highlights the requirements and conditions under which people deal with various aspects of risks and crises from both the individual and professional perspectives.

Relevant knowledge has been drawn from a wide range of sources, theoretical approaches and empirical research in various areas of application. Throughout, the need for both theoretical models to explain human behavior in difficult situations and empirical research on how people actually deal with risks and crises for their own benefit and to support others is emphasized. This knowledge is important for planning, designing communication and support measures for both everyday emergencies and extreme events.

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