

BETTY KAMAN LEE

## Audience-Oriented Approach to Crisis Communication:

### *A Study of Hong Kong Consumers' Evaluation of an Organizational Crisis*

*This study investigated the responses of consumers to information about an organizational crisis. Three hundred and eighty-five individuals from Hong Kong responded to hypothetical scenarios describing a plane crash. The scenarios manipulated causal attribution (internal and external), the organizations' crisis response (shifting the blame, minimization, no comment, apology, compensation, and corrective action), and crisis severity (severe and extremely severe). Results showed significant main effects of causal attribution and crisis response on (a) judgment of organizational responsibility for the crisis, (b) impression of the organization, (c) sympathy toward the organization, and (d) trust in the organization. However, no significant effects of crisis severity were found. Crisis response affected participants' judgment of organizational responsibility, and the "no comment" crisis response fostered more trust in the organization than did the minimization crisis response. Implications of the findings for attribution theory and cross-cultural research on crisis communication are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *attribution; organizational crisis; accounts; consumers; audience analysis; Hong Kong*

Research focused on crisis communication has gone through two developmental stages. During Stage 1, researchers identified and analyzed response strategies used in particular crises (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995) including apologies, excuses, accounts, responses to embarrassment, image restoration, and impression management (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). At Stage 2, scholars shifted their attention to identifying the characteristics

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH, Vol. 31 No. 5, October 2004 600-618  
DOI: 10.1177/0093650204267936  
© 2004 Sage Publications

of crises that predict the selection of appropriate response strategies (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001). Although informative, most extant research has not adopted an audience orientation nor has it investigated how crisis communication occurs in non-Western cultures.

An audience orientation should provide valuable insights into how individuals understand and react to an organizational crisis. Vasquez's (1993, 1994) *homo narrans* perspective characterizes the autonomous, interpretive, communicative, and communal nature of an audience. He argued that individuals are motivated to engage in a symbolic process to make sense of their world, and through a process of message initiation, configuration, and reconfiguration, individuals' view of an event gradually becomes their symbolic reality. Applying the *homo narrans* perspective to understanding crisis communication, an audience is believed to actively construct a symbolic reality about the crisis, the organization, and other public members' evaluations that could change as the crisis unfolds. Because researchers have not adopted an audience orientation, there is limited insight into this sense-making process.

Notwithstanding the growing interest in culture among organizational scholars, surprisingly little research informs as to how non-Western audiences interpret and evaluate information about a crisis. Certainly, organizational crises occur in non-Western organizations. For example, in Asia, the number of organizational crises has accelerated in the past few years, and each crisis has captured intensive local and/or international media coverage including the Hong Kong Chek Lap Kok Airport launching chaos in 1998, the Cathay Pacific labor strikes in 1998 and 2000, and the SARS outbreak in 2003. However, because little crisis research has been conducted in an Asian culture, it is unclear whether perspectives that are used to study organizational crises in Western cultures are useful for understanding crises in non-Western cultures.

To fill the aforementioned gaps in the literature, this article reports the results of a study that examined citizens' evaluation of organizational crises in Hong Kong. The current study was grounded in a perspective that examines how individuals react to information provided about a crisis. The framework is focused on causal attribution, organizational response to a crisis, and crisis severity. In the following sections, I discuss each of these variables.

## Causal Attribution

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) defined an organizational crisis "as a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or perceive to threaten an organization's

high-priority goals" (p. 233). Weiner (1986) argued that when an event is negative, unexpected, or important, people are likely to engage in causal attribution processing. Scholars have noted the relevancy of Weiner's perspective for understanding organizational crises. Coombs (1995) adopted Weiner's attributional theory to develop a  $2 \times 2$  (internal-external and intentional-unintentional) matrix that categorized four types of organizational crises: accident—is placed in the unintentional and internal quadrant; transgression—is intentional and internal; faux pas—is located on the unintentional and external quadrant; and terrorism—is considered as intentional and external. Although useful, Coombs's (1995) categorization was based on the assumption that a particular crisis type (e.g., accident) yielded only one causal attribution. This overlooks the possible variations of attributions that may occur within a particular crisis. Hence, an audience could vary in their opinion that a company should be held accountable for a particular crisis. That is the focus of this research.

Weiner's (1986) notion of locus and controllability is particularly applicable to the crisis context. Locus, in a crisis context, specifies the location of the cause of a crisis as internal or external to the organization. Controllability refers to whether the prevention of a crisis is within the control of the organization. A crisis cause that is perceived to be within the boundaries of an organization (internal locus) is often perceived as controllable. Likewise, a crisis cause that is perceived to be outside the realm of an organization (external locus) is often viewed as uncontrollable. As such, a crisis cause could be conceptualized as residing somewhere along a continuum of internal/controllable-external/uncontrollable. For the purpose of simplification, this article uses the terms *internal* and *external* to address the two conditions of causal attribution. However, readers are reminded that these conditions also encompass the dimension of controllability.

Social psychologists (e.g., Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Jaspars, Fincham, & Hewstone, 1983) noted that observers often go beyond the attributions of causality to make judgments regarding who should be held accountable for an observed act in an interpersonal context. Likewise, people should assign crisis responsibility (the degree to which audience blames the organization for the crisis incident) after causal attribution. If so, crisis responsibility is attributed when (a) the source of crisis is identified and (b) there is a perception that the identified source should have been able to foresee the outcome; that is, internal attribution is likely to bring about an attribution of crisis responsibility.

Weiner (1986) examined subsequent emotional reactions after causal attribution in interpersonal contexts. He found that when personal failure is internally attributed, anger is elicited. On the other hand, when personal

failure is assigned to causes viewed as uncontrollable, pity is elicited. Likewise, an internal attribution of a crisis cause should elicit more negative reactions toward the organization than would an external attribution of the cause of a crisis (Weiner, Amirkhan, Folkes, & Verette, 1987). Hence, I posit the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Individuals who read about an organizational crisis with an internal cause will (a) judge the organization as having more responsibility for the crisis, (b) be more likely to form negative impressions of the organization, (c) be less sympathetic toward the organization, and (d) mistrust the organization more than will those who read about an organizational crisis with an external cause.

## Organizational Crisis Response

Organizational crisis response is an organization's effort to reestablish institutional and actional legitimacy (Boyd, 2000; Hearit, 1994), and several taxonomies describe the response strategies of Western organizations (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995). A recent analysis (Lee, 2000) indicates that the following six responses are commonly used by organizations in Hong Kong: (a) shifting the blame—a claim that others are responsible for the crisis instead, (b) minimization—a claim that the consequences of the crisis are not as bad as have been portrayed, (c) no comment—a refusal to comment, (d) apology—a verbal apologetic statement, (e) compensation—monetary compensation to victims, and (f) corrective action—action taken to prevent the reoccurrence of the same problem.

Consistent with prior research (Coombs, 1998; McLaughlin, Cody, & O'Hair, 1983), the six aforementioned responses should reflect attempts to deny (shifting the blame, minimization, and no comment) or accept responsibility (accept responsibility, compensation, corrective action). Shifting the blame admits that a crisis occurred but alleges that others are responsible. Thus, it reflects the greatest attempt to deny responsibility among the six crisis responses. Minimization reflects the second most responsibility-denying response because the organization attempts to reduce the perceived severity of the crisis by redefining the crisis. An organization that refuses to comment is often in a situation in which it is unable to decline the crisis and attempts to dissociate itself from the crisis by remaining silent. As a result, no comment represents the third most responsibility-denying response.

When organizational officials apologize, they accept responsibility for the crisis. Compensation extends the acceptance of responsibility by offering monetary reparations. Finally, corrective action involves identifying and fix-

ing the source of the crisis. Corrective action represents the greatest acceptance of responsibility for a crisis because by identifying and fixing the source of the crisis, the organization not only exhibits responsibility for the current crisis but also shows an effort to prevent future crises. Extant studies find that corporate responses denoting acceptance of responsibility fostered more positive brand attitudes, a stronger corporate image, and more supportive behavior (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Griffin, Babin, & Attaway, 1991).

An organization's response to a crisis may affect a consumer's perception of the organization's responsibility. Quattrone (1982) argued that people often engage in "backward chaining" in which they analyze actions that occur after an action to infer what caused the action. In the context of organizational crisis, audiences often do not have a personal understanding of the organization, and to make sense of the current situation, they engage in backward chaining from the observed crisis responses to determine the crisis cause. If so, then an organization's response may influence a consumer's understanding the organization's role in causing the crisis as well as their evaluations of the organization. Consumers may regard a denial as a self-serving attempt to avoid blame and that action is blameworthy. Indeed, denial of responsibility for a negative event can elicit anger and aggression (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). In contrast, an organization's acceptance of crisis responsibility may appear more honorable, which may reduce the likelihood of negative responses. Research has found that acceptance of responsibility for a negative event can increase sympathy and forgiveness (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Therefore, I offer the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Individuals who read about an organizational crisis in which the organization attempts to deny crisis responsibility will (a) judge the organization as having more responsibility for the crisis, (b) be more likely to form negative impressions of the organization, (c) be less sympathetic toward the organization, and (d) mistrust the organization more than will those who read about an organizational crisis in which the organization accepts responsibility for the crisis.

## Crisis Severity

In some cases, an organizational crisis has direct consequences for the audience; and in these instances, the crisis is more severe than when the event is of little consequence. Jones and Davis (1965) coined the term *hedonic relevance* to refer to the effect that an actor's actions have on a perceiver. When individuals perceive hedonic relevance, they tend to infer that an observed act corresponds to the actor's internal dispositions. An inference to internal

dispositions holds the actor more responsible for the observed act than does an inference to external factors (Jones & Davis, 1965; Weiner et al., 1987).

Based on Jones and Davis's (1965) hedonic relevance notion, it could be argued that the more severe the crisis, the more personal involvement/relevance is aroused in the audience, which, in turn, leads to more attribution of responsibility to the organization. Furthermore, high crisis severity may trigger negative emotional reactions as well as sending a danger signal to the observing consumers of the possible risks involved in being a customer of the offending organization. As a result, I predict the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* Individuals who read about a severe organizational crisis will (a) judge the organization as having more responsibility for the crisis, (b) be more likely to form negative impressions of the organization, (c) be less sympathetic toward the organization, and (d) mistrust the organization more than will those who read about a less severe organizational crisis.

Next, I report the results of a study that tests my hypotheses.

## Method

### *Participants*

Using a snowball sampling technique, a total of 385 citizens of Hong Kong were recruited for the current study, of which 123 were men, 227 were women, and 35 did not identify their sex. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 57 years ( $M = 28.54$ ,  $SD = 9.10$ ). All of them had the equivalency of a 12th-grade education with 82% having at least some university education. Among the participants, 36.6% were currently students, and the remaining 61.2% were working people.

### *Design*

To test the hypotheses, I used a 2 (Causal Attribution: Internal and External)  $\times$  6 (Crisis Response: Shifting the Blame, Minimization, No Comment, Apology, Compensation, and Corrective Action)  $\times$  2 (Crisis Severity: Severe and Extremely Severe) between-subject experimental design. The manipulations were embedded within descriptions of a hypothetical plane crash. I conducted a pretest that showed that a sample of Hong Kong residents regarded a plane crash as the most serious type of crisis relative to two other common crises (product tampering and employee strikes) that have occurred in Hong Kong in the recent past (Lee, 2000). Based on the assumption that a highly

severe crisis would (a) make participants more involved and (b) more likely trigger their evaluation mechanisms, a plane crash was chosen as the crisis type for the primary experiment. The conditions of the three independent variables are listed in Appendix A. A plane crash scenario with 24 variations was created with different combinations of causal attribution, crisis response, and crisis severity.

### *Procedures*

All manipulations and questionnaires were written in Chinese. Each participant received a randomly assigned questionnaire that described 1 of the 24 variations of a plane crash scenario. Within each scenario, participants were presented with two pieces of news. The first piece of news described the severity and the cause of the plane crash. The second piece of the news described the crisis response delivered by the organization on the day after the plane crash. Participants were asked to answer questions regarding their response to the scenario.

### *Measures*

*Perceived organizational responsibility for the crisis.* Participants were asked to indicate on 7-point Likert-type scales (a) to what degree they thought the organization should be blamed (1 = *not at all to be blamed*, 7 = *absolutely to be blamed*) and (b) how much responsibility the organization should bear (1 = *not at all responsible*, 7 = *totally responsible*). The resulting scale was internally reliable,  $\alpha = .85$ .

*Negative impression of the organization.* Two items constituted this subscale. Participants were asked to indicate on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which they agree with the following items: (a) "I don't like [the organization]" and (b) "I have a negative impression of [the organization]." Internal consistency for the subscale of negative impression of the organization was acceptable,  $\alpha = .86$ .

*Sympathy toward the organization.* Participants were asked to describe their sympathy toward the organization on four, 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*): (a) "I am frustrated at [the organization]"; (b) "I think [the organization] should be punished"; (c) "I feel like reprimanding [the organization]"; and (d) "I am sympathetic to [the organization]." Items a, b, and c were reverse-coded items. Internal consistency for the subscale of sympathy toward the organization was acceptable,  $\alpha = .88$ .

*Degree of trust in the organization.* Participants were asked to respond to the following eight questions measuring their degree of trust in the organization and its products and services on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*): (a) “I lost my confidence in [the organization]”; (b) “[The organization] is still trustworthy”; (c) “[The organization] is reliable”; (d) “I doubt about the quality of [the organization]”; (e) “I lost my confidence in [the organization]’s planes and services”; (f) “[The organization]’s planes and services are still trustworthy”; (g) “[The organization]’s planes and services are reliable”; and (h) “I doubt about the quality of [the organization]’s planes and services.” Items a, d, e, and h were reverse-coded items. Internal consistency for the subscale of trust in the organization was acceptable,  $\alpha = .94$ .

*Manipulation check.* The following questions were designed to assess the effectiveness of the causal attribution and severity experimental manipulations. To assess participants’ perceptions of internal and external causes, participants were asked to answer three questions: (a) to what degree they thought the incident was caused by the organization on seven items with endpoints anchored at *not at all caused by [the organization]* and *totally caused by [the organization]*; (b) to what degree they thought the organization could have prevented the incident on seven items with endpoints anchored at *not at all preventable by [the organization]* and *absolutely preventable by [the organization]*; and (c) to what degree they thought the organization could have controlled the accident on seven items with endpoints anchored at *not at all controllably by [the organization]* and *totally controllably by [the organization]*. Internal consistency of the three items was acceptable,  $\alpha = .82$ . To assess participants’ perceived degree-of-crisis severity, participants were asked to indicate on one 7-point scale how severe they thought the incident was. Anchors were *not at all severe* and *extremely severe*.

## Results

### *Manipulation Checks*

Manipulation checks on causal attribution and crisis severity were performed to ensure the effectiveness of the intended manipulations. First, the three causal attribution manipulation check items were aggregated to form a single manipulation check variable with higher scores reflecting a greater degree of perceived internal cause, and lower scores indicating a greater degree of perceived external cause. As expected, the mean for the manipulation check variable was greater in the internal cause condition ( $M = 5.50$ ,



$SD = .98$ ) than in the external condition ( $M = 4.33, SD = .97$ ), and these means differed significantly,  $t(383) = 11.75, p < .001$ .

Second, the crisis severity item was used to assess the success of the crisis severity manipulation. As expected, respondents in the extremely severe condition rated it as significantly,  $t(383) = 2.39, p < .05$ , more severe ( $M = 6.13, SD = 1.10$ ) than did those in the severe condition ( $M = 5.82, SD = 1.16$ ). The manipulation checks for causal attribution and crisis severity indicated that the manipulations were successful.

To avoid sensitizing participants to the response manipulation, a pretest was conducted with a different sample to determine whether the six types of crisis response clustered into two sets of strategies that reflect different degrees of acceptance of responsibility: (a) denial strategies: shifting the blame, minimization, no comment; and (b) acceptance strategies: apology, compensation, and corrective action. This order was empirically confirmed (see Lee, 2000, for details).

### *Examination of the Hypotheses*

A MANOVA indicated that there were no two- or three-way interactions among the three independent variables on the composite of the four dependent variables (judgment of crisis responsibility, negative impression of the organization, sympathy toward the organization, and trust in the organization). This finding indicated that the overall main effects could be interpreted. MANOVA analyses revealed significant main effects of (a) causal attribution,  $F(4, 348) = 15.29, \Lambda = .85, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ ; and (b) crisis response,  $F(20, 1155) = 5.57, \Lambda = .74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ . The main effect of crisis severity on the composite of the four dependent variables was found nonsignificant,  $F(4, 348) = 1.89, \Lambda = .98, p > .10, \eta^2 = .02$ .

### *Main Effects of Causal Attribution and Crisis Response*

Univariate  $F$  tests of the hypothesized main effects of causal attribution were conducted. As expected, results revealed that the respondents in the internal cause condition attributed greater organizational responsibility,  $F(1, 351) = 46.43, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , and (b) had a more-negative impression of the organization,  $F(1, 351) = 24.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$  than did those in the external cause condition. On the other hand, respondents in the external cause condition reported significantly greater sympathy toward the organization,  $F(1, 351) = 44.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , and (b) trust in the organization,  $F(1, 351) = 49.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , than did those in the internal condition. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviation of Dependent Variables for Internal Cause, External Cause, Denial of Crisis Responsibility, and Acceptance of Crisis Responsibility Condition Groups*

Variable	Internal Cause		External Cause		Denial of Crisis Responsibility		Acceptance of Crisis Responsibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Judgment of organizational responsibility for crisis	5.67 <sup>a</sup>	1.05	4.96 <sup>a</sup>	1.11	5.57 <sup>b</sup>	0.99	5.06 <sup>b</sup>	1.23
2. Negative impression toward the organization	5.01 <sup>a</sup>	1.37	4.39 <sup>a</sup>	1.39	5.23 <sup>b</sup>	1.33	4.15 <sup>b</sup>	1.28
3. Sympathy toward the organization	2.96 <sup>a</sup>	1.24	3.73 <sup>a</sup>	1.22	2.87 <sup>b</sup>	1.18	3.85 <sup>b</sup>	1.20
4. Degree of trust in the company	2.86 <sup>a</sup>	1.10	3.57 <sup>a</sup>	1.06	2.89 <sup>b</sup>	1.06	3.55 <sup>b</sup>	1.12

*Note.* a. Significant group difference between the internal cause and external cause condition groups.

b. Significant group difference between the denial of crisis responsibility and acceptance of crisis responsibility condition groups.

To test Hypothesis 2, a planned comparison was tested for examining differences between the denial of crisis responsibility conditions (an aggregate of shifting the blame condition, minimization condition, and no-comment condition) and the acceptance-of-crisis responsibility conditions (an aggregate of the apology condition, compensation condition, and correctively action condition). A multivariate Helmert contrast indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups on the four dependent variables,  $F(4, 370) = 19.53, \Lambda = .83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ . A univariate Helmert contrast indicated that the denial-of-crisis responsibility group reported significantly higher scores than the acceptance-of-crisis responsibility group on (a) judgment of organizational responsibility,  $F(1, 373) = 20.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , and (b) negative impression of the organization,  $F(1, 373) = 66.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ . In contrast, the acceptance-of-crisis responsibility group yielded significantly higher scores than the denial-of-crisis responsibility group in (a) sympathy toward the organization,  $F(1, 373) = 65.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ , and (b) degree of trust in the organization,  $F(1, 373) = 32.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ , thereby confirming Hypothesis 2. The descriptive data for the internal cause, external cause, denial-of-crisis responsibility, and the acceptance-of-crisis responsibility condition groups are presented in Table 1.

Two post hoc tests were performed to ensure that there was minimal within-response effects. A post hoc test was first performed to examine possi-

ble differences among the denial-of-responsibility responses (shifting the blame, minimization, and no-comment conditions) on the four dependent variables. A post hoc Scheffe test revealed that respondents in the no-comment condition were more trustful of the organization,  $F(2, 188) = 3.52, p < .05$  than were those in the minimization condition. On the other hand, the respondents in the minimization condition group perceived greater organizational responsibility than did those in the no-comment condition,  $F(2, 188) = 3.68, p < .05$ . No significant differences among the three condition groups were found in negative impression of the organization,  $F(2, 188) = 1.85, ns$ , or sympathy toward the organization,  $F(2, 188) = 2.59, ns$ .

The second post hoc test was performed to examine differences among the three acceptance-of-responsibility responses (apology, compensation, and corrective action conditions) on the four dependent variables. A post hoc Scheffe test showed that respondents in the compensation condition were significantly more sympathetic toward the organization,  $F(2, 181) = 4.63, p < .05$  than were those in the apology condition. No significant differences among the three condition groups were found in judgment of organizational responsibility,  $F(2, 181) = 1.95, ns$ , negative impression of the organization,  $F(2, 181) = 2.88, ns$ , and trust in organization,  $F(2, 181) = 2.75, ns$ . Descriptive data for shifting-the-blame, minimization, no-comment, apology, compensation, and corrective action conditions are presented in Table 2.

## Discussion

I first summarize the results, then draw implications for attribution theory and cross-cultural research, and end the section with limitations and directions for future inquiry.

### *Summary*

McLaughlin, Cody, and Read (1992) maintained that "it is useful to try to take the recipient's perspective and try to evaluate whether he or she is likely to find the account to be coherent" (p. xvi). Consistent with that assertion, the current study shows the effects of causal attribution on participants' cognitive (judgment of organizational responsibility), perceptual (negative impression of the organization and trust in the organization), and affective (sympathy toward the organization) reactions in a crisis context. Specifically, results indicated that individuals who read about an organizational crisis with an internal cause (a) judged the organization as having more responsibility for the crisis, (b) formed more negative impressions of the organization,

Table 2  
*Means and Standard Deviation of Dependent Variables for the Six Crisis Response Condition Groups*

Variable	Shifting the Blame		Minimization		No Comment		Apology		Compensation		Corrective Action	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Judgment of organizational responsibility for crisis	5.48	0.94	5.82 <sup>a</sup>	0.97	5.40 <sup>a</sup>	1.00	5.17	1.27	4.78	1.22	5.17	1.16
2. Negative impression toward the organization	5.29	1.35	5.45	1.30	5.45	1.30	4.46	1.28	3.94	1.38	4.00	1.13
3. Sympathy toward the organization	2.83	1.32	2.63	1.16	3.10	0.95	3.52 <sup>b</sup>	1.28	4.14 <sup>b</sup>	1.13	3.95	1.09
4. Degree of trust in the company	2.83	1.06	2.69 <sup>a</sup>	1.14	3.17 <sup>a</sup>	0.94	3.31	1.13	3.82	1.12	3.56	1.05

*Note.* a. Significant group difference between the two denial-of-crisis responsibility condition groups.

b. Significant group difference between two acceptance-of-crisis responsibility condition groups.

(c) were less sympathetic toward the organization, and (d) mistrusted the organization more than those who read about an organizational crisis with an external cause.

In their evaluation of crisis response, participants in the denial-of-crisis responsibility conditions (a) judged the organization as having more responsibility for the crisis, (b) formed more negative impressions of the organization, (c) were less sympathetic toward the organization, and (d) mistrusted the organization more than those who read about an organizational crisis in which the organization accepted responsibility for the crisis.

The scope of the impact of an organization's crisis response reaffirms that the crisis response is as pivotal as the crisis cause in the audiences' eyes. In addition, an organization's attempt to deny organizational responsibility for a crisis could be a mistake. The current study shows that participants judged the organization to be more responsible for the crisis when the organization attempted to deny crisis responsibility. There are two possible explanations for this finding. First, participants may have used crisis response as a cue to engage in backward chaining to trace back to the crisis cause (Quattrone, 1982). An organization's attempt to distance itself from the crisis may indeed appear defensive in the eyes of the participants and signal its guilt. If this proposition holds true, it might suggest that audiences tend to hold a disbelieving and critical attitude toward information provided by the organization. Audiences may be more inclined to find out about the crisis themselves.

Second, the organizational crisis response may be a direct triggering stimulus to participants' judgment of organizational responsibility for the crisis. Participants might perceive a denial-of-crisis responsibility as blameworthy, regardless of the cause. On the other hand, an organization's acceptance of crisis responsibility may engender sympathy, resulting in audiences attributing less responsibility to the organization. Future studies should explore the possible backward chaining and triggering mechanisms generated by a crisis response.

### *Implications for Attribution Theory*

The findings of the current study have implications for attribution research. First, Weiner's attributional theory, although originated in and for an interpersonal context, is shown to be applicable to an organizational context. Specifically, Weiner's (1986) causal dimensions seem to capture how individuals make sense of an organization's behavior just as they do about person's action. In a sense, consumers seem to be engaging in anthropomorphizing.

Second, the current study brings in new elements and a new orientation to the traditional attribution research by (a) introducing the response of the

observed entity (in the current study, the organization) to the attributional process and (b) suggesting a possibility of looping/back and forth (causal attribution → judgment of crisis responsibility → organization's crisis response → judgment of crisis responsibility) pattern of perceivers' causal attribution processes. It sheds some new light into the attribution research by demonstrating the dynamic and nonlinear nature of perceivers' causal attribution processes.

### *Cross-Cultural Implications for Crisis Communication*

One goal of the current study was to determine if perspectives used to study organizational crisis in Western cultures are useful for understanding those in non-Western cultures. Because the design did not include a sample from a Western culture, it is not possible to assess cross-cultural differences. However, by looking at the degree to which the perspectives used to study crisis communication in Western cultures are predictive of audience perceptions in a non-Western sample, one can draw some tentative implications. As noted earlier, many of the hypotheses were confirmed that implies the Western frameworks are generalizable. However, there are several findings that suggest cross-cultural variations.

First, post hoc tests showed that participants who were presented with the no-comment response reported significantly more trust in the organization and judged the organization as having less crisis responsibility than did those who were presented with the minimization response. Whereas a no-comment response could be viewed as nonresponsive and viewed negatively in Western society (Davis & Holtgraves, 1984), participants of Hong Kong demonstrated a more-accepting attitude toward this response. One explanation could be that within Chinese culture, a silent, reserved gesture is often seen as an act of wisdom, as taught in Confucius's maxim to "think three times before you act" (Bond, 1991). Thus, the Chinese cultural value of keeping silent may have some countering effects on the negative impact of the no-comment response on participants' judgment of crisis responsibility and trust in the organization. Further studies on how culture affects audiences' evaluation of organizational crisis response need to be done.

Second, among the three crisis responses (apology, compensation, and corrective action) that denote an acceptance-of-crisis responsibility, the compensation response yielded more sympathy from the participants than did the apology response. A possible explanation for the current study's findings could be that apology is overused in Asian cultures (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978). Apology in some Asian cultures is often ritualistic in nature (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). Indeed, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) maintained that Chinese

speakers often appear overly polite, even obsequious. Knowing how apology is commonly used (or abused) in their culture, participants might have seen the organization's apology as merely a routine and ritualistic behavior. If so, it is understandable why Hong Kong consumers favor practical, purpose-specific, and action-specific offers of compensation rather than verbal expressions of sorrow.

### *Limitations and Suggestions*

As with any study, my methods imposed limits on the generalizability of my results, each of which suggest areas of future inquiry. First, it is possible that my experimental method has oversimplified the nature of organizational crises. In many situations, causation of a crisis is unclear or disputed. Future research should explore crisis situations in which the information is ambiguous.

Second, because of the difficulties of random sampling, I employed a snowball sampling procedure that could limit the scope of my findings. One should be cautious in generalizing the findings of the current study to the entire population of Hong Kong or other Chinese-based societies until these findings are replicated.

Third, although my manipulation checks demonstrated statistically significant differences in the desired direction, the means were often on one side of the midpoint (4) of the 7-point scales. Using this comparison point, the current study was comparing a condition in which there was moderately high internal causal attribution ( $M = 5.5$ ) with one in which there was a moderate amount ( $M = 4.33$ ). The current study was also comparing a condition of extreme severity ( $M = 6.13$ ) with one of high severity ( $M = 5.82$ ). Hence, the conditions were indeed representative of only a small range of the variables of interest, which might explain the failure of the hypothesized effects of crisis severity. Future studies should manipulate conditions to represent a larger range of variation.

Fourth, the current study examined one scenario (a plane crash) and one type of organization (profit-making company) only. Hence, one should be cautious in generalizing the results to organizational crises of different types. Future crisis communication research may examine different types of (a) crisis (e.g., product tampering, environment damaging, misconduct), (b) organization (e.g., nonprofit organizations, government, international corporations), (c) stakeholders (e.g., stockholders, investors, customers), and (d) different cultures. To further enhance validity, future studies could also include the analyses of stakeholders' opinions expressed in newspapers, the Internet, and radio phone-in programs when an organizational crisis occurs.

Finally, audiences' evaluation of an organizational crisis is a complex matter in which political, economic, and cultural factors all play a significant role. The current study was limited to the manner in which two entities (organization and audience) interact with each other (e.g., in the form of message production by the organization, or message interpretation and evaluation by the audience). Obviously, there are many other factors that need to be included in future research. For example, McLeod (2000) remarked that the lack of attention paid to social structural antecedents is one of the major obstacles to progress in audience research. He contended that behavioral researchers, with strong backgrounds in social psychology, often neglect the influences of social networks, community, society, and culture on audience behavioral outcomes. To connect the macro aspects of culture to the micro aspects of audience interpretation would signify progress, if not a breakthrough in the communication field.

### *Appendix A*

#### *Conditions for Each Independent Variable Derived From Pretest*

Condition for the Independent Variable	Manipulation
Causal attribution	
Internal	Yesterday, Asia Pacific Airlines flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire while landing. Investigations into the airline fire indicated that it was caused by outdated equipment in the plane.
External	Yesterday, Asia Pacific Airlines flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire while landing. Investigations into the fire indicate that it was caused by bad weather.
Crisis response	
Shifting the blame	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airline flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Mr. Albert Wong, the CEO of Asia Pacific Airline said, "We don't think it's entirely our responsibility. There could be others causing this incident to happen! These kinds of incidents are difficult to source out who is responsible."
Minimization	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airline flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Mr. Albert Wong, the CEO of Asia Pacific Airline, says, "Well, we think the consequences are actually not as serious as being reported in the press."

*(continued)*



*Appendix A (Continued)*

Condition for the Independent Variable	Manipulation
No comment	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airline flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Mr. Albert Wong, the CEO of Asia Pacific Airline refused to comment on the fire.
Apology	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airline flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Mr. Albert Wong, the CEO of Asia Pacific Airline, said, "We are very sorry and express our deep-felt apology to the victims and their families."
Compensation	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airline flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Mr. Albert Wong, the CEO of Asia Pacific Airline, said, "We will do all that we can to compensate them for their loss."
Correction	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airline flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Mr. Albert Wong, the CEO of Asia Pacific Airline, says, "We will do our best to identify the problem and make our every effort to correct it."
Crisis severity Severe	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airlines flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire when landing. Approximately 200 passengers and crew members got injured while evacuating. About 100 of them remained serious conditions in the hospitals.
Extremely severe	Yesterday evening, Asia Pacific Airlines flight 323 departing from Malaysia for Hong Kong caught fire on the way. All 300 passengers and crewmembers died with no survivors.

## References

- Allen, M. W., & Caillouet, R. H. (1994). Legitimate endeavors: Impression management strategies used by an organization in crisis. *Communication Monographs*, 61, 44-62.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bond, M. (1991). *Beyond the Chinese face: Insights from psychology*. Hong Kong, People's Republic of China: Oxford University Press (China) Ltd.
- Borkin, A., & Reinhart, S. (1978). Excuse me and I'm sorry. *TESOL Quarterly*, 12, 157-176.

- Boyd, J. (2000). Actional legitimation: No crisis necessary. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*, 341-353.
- Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the right words: The development of guidelines for the selection of the "appropriate" crisis response strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly, 8*, 447-476.
- Coombs, W. T. (1998). An analytic framework for crisis situations: Better responses from a better understanding of the situation. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 10*, 177-191.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (1996). Communication and attributions in a crisis: An experimental study in crisis communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 8*, 279-295.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2001). An extended examination of the crisis situations: A fusion of the relational management and symbolic approaches. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 13*, 321-340.
- Coombs, W. T., & Schmidt, L. (2000). An empirical analysis of image restoration: Texaco's racism crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*, 163-178.
- Davis, D., & Holtgraves, T. (1984). Perceptions of unresponsive others: Attributions, attraction, understandability, and memory of their utterance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 20*, 383-408.
- Fincham, F. D., & Jaspars, J. M. (1980). Attribution of responsibility: From man the scientist to man as lawyer. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 13, pp. 81-138). New York: Academic Press.
- Griffin, M., Babin, B. J., & Attaway, J. S. (1991). An empirical investigation of the impact of negative public publicity on consumer attitudes and intentions. In R. H. Holman & M. R. Solomon (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research* (Vol. 18, pp. 334-341). Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- Hearit, K. M. (1994). Apologies and public relations crises at Chrysler, Toshiba, and Volvo. *Public Relations Review, 20*, 113-125.
- Jaspars, J., Fincham, F. D., & Hewstone, M. (Eds.). (1983). *Attribution theory and research: Conceptual, developmental and social dimensions*. London: Academic Press.
- Jones, E. E., & Davis, K. E. (1965). From acts to dispositions: The attribution process in person perception. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 219-266). New York: Academic Press.
- Lee, B. K. (2000). *Audience evaluation process in organizational crisis: A study of consumers in Hong Kong*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.
- McLaughlin, M. L., Cody, M. J., & O'Hair, H. D. (1983). The management of failure events: Some contextual determinants of accounting behavior. *Human Communication Research, 9*, 208-224.
- McLaughlin, M. L., Cody, M. J., & Read, S. J. (1992). *Explaining one's self to others: Reason-giving in a social context*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McLeod, J. M. (2000, April). *Trends in audience research in the United States*. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Conference of Chi-

- nese Audiences Across Time and Space, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.
- Ohbuchi, K., Kameda, M., & Agarie, N. (1989). Apology as aggression control: Its role in mediating appraisal of and responds to harm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 219-227.
- Olshtain, E., & Cohen, A. D. (1983). Apology: A speech act set. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition* (pp. 18-35). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Quattrone, G. A. (1982). Overattribution and unit formation: When behavior engulfs the person. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 593-607.
- Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (2001). Communication, organization, and crisis. In M. E. Roloff (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 21* (pp. 231-276). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vasquez, G. M. (1993). A homo narrans paradigm for public relations: Combining Bormann's symbolic convergence theory and Grunig's situational theory of publics. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 5(3), 201-216.
- Vasquez, G. M. (1994). Testing a communication theory-method-message-behavior complex for the investigation of publics. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 6, 291-316.
- Weiner, B. (1986). *An attributional theory of motivation and emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Weiner, B., Amirkhan, J., Folkes, V. S., & Verette, J. A. (1987). An attribution analysis of excuse giving: Studies of a naïve theory of emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 316-324.
- Weiner, B., Graham, S., Peter, O., & Zmuidinas, M. (1991). Public confession and forgiveness. *Journal of Personality*, 59, 281-312.

**Betty Kaman Lee** (Ph.D., Hong Kong Baptist University, 2001) is an assistant professor in the Department of English and Communication at City University of Hong Kong. Her research interests lie in corporate communication and intercultural communication. Current research includes crisis communication and corporate reputation with an audience-orientation.