

Moral Judgment and Blame in Crisis Management

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본 연구는 위기유형 및 조직의 위기대응과 관련하여 공중이 어떻게 도덕적 판단을 하는가에 관한 연구이다. 공중의 위기평가에 있어서 도덕적 판단은 조직에 대한 비난에 주요한 요인으로 작용될 수 있다. 이를 검증하기 위해서 본 연구는 요인설계 2 (통제 가능한 위기유형 vs. 통제 불가능 위기유형) × 2 (변명 vs. 사과)를 통한 실험을 실시하였다. 그 결과 공중은 위기유형과 위기대응에 따라 도덕적 판단을 달리하며, 도덕적 판단은 조직비난에 유의미한 변인임이 밝혀졌다.

주제어: 위기유형, 위기대응유형, 도덕적 판단, 공중비난

I. Introduction

Attribution theory has been generally used in crisis management to investigate a public's evaluation of an organizational crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). However, attribution theory and crisis management scholars have missed a mediated part between publics' perception of crisis situations and blaming to an organization. In other words, the reason why people place blame on an organization during a crisis have yet to be explored. Crisis management scholars have contended that crisis types and crisis responses determine intensity or amount of blame (Coombs, 1998; 1999; 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2001; 2004; Lee, 2005). For instance, a controllable crisis or irresponsible crisis response produces more blame for the organization than does an uncontrollable or responsible crisis response during a crisis. The statement seems obvious, but contemplating the concept of blame raises a critical question: how is it possible for human beings to judge an event or an action as blameworthy? The purpose of this study is to illuminate a precise cognitive process of public's evaluation on an organizational crisis. The benefit from building a parsimonious model in explaining public's cognitive process in a crisis is that crisis managers can detect an essence of blameworthy and devise a fundamental and efficient crisis response strategy to dilute public's blame to an organization.

1. Moral judgment & blame

The past studies have linked attributions of blame directly to blameworthy. That is, locus of crisis, controllability, and crisis response types are attributions of blame, and based on those factors, people decide amount of blame toward an organization involved in the crisis. In the cognitive process, people first perceive the causes of a crisis and appraise whether an organizational crisis response is appropriate to the crisis. Then, the cognition leads to judgment of blame. It seems a logical process in people's cognition, but there must be a blank space between the appraisal and blaming. Blame is a social judgment, and being blamed or blameworthy means that "there is something wrong." The judgment of whether an action or event is wrong or right is called "moral judgment" (Gilbert, 2006). Examining the inherent rightness or wrong of behavior based on personal, social, cultural values or rules of behaviors is deontological moral judgment (Hunt and Vitell, 1986). Society provides human beings a value system by which a persons determines what is right or wrong. Moral judgments in most instances do not need a long span in the cognitive process. The more evident the issue is, the less it takes to be judged. Murder, rape, or child abuse is clearly regarded as immoral behavior in American society, the action of the perpetrator should be blamed. So, when you read a news story about this type of action. It does not take more than a minute to blame the actor. Such moral judgment process is called intuitive moral judgment (Haidt, 2001; Shweder & Haidt, 1993). Cumulative experiences and clear moral standard contribute to the intuitive moral judgment. On the other hand, some issues require a bit longer to asses in the cognitive process. Abortion, gun control, or same sex marriage might be the examples. Moral judgment of these issues is a process of reasoning or reflection (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1965).

Using either process of moral judgment, people determine to what extent an organization should be blamed. According to Shaver's (1985) model of the process of attributing blame, people first perceive cause and consequence of an event or action, and then make an attribution of moral responsibility, appreciation of the moral wrongfulness of the event or action. The moral judgment cognitively link to level of blame toward an actor of the event or action.

2. Attributions to moral judgment in crisis management

Either process (intuitive or reasoning process) intervenes between attributions of crisis and

blame to an organization. In other words, the cognitive process that people uses to identify the causes of a crisis and perceive an organizational crisis response strategy to the crisis, provides components by which people can make moral judgment determining amount of blame. Attribution theorists and crisis management scholars have neglected addressing the linkage. This current study attempts to explore the role of moral judgment in the attributions of blame.

Do people treat all types of crises as moral issues? Weiner, Perry, and Magnusson (1988) mentioned that observers automatically link others' negative behavior or organizational action such as drug abuse or discharging water waste with morals. Obviously, a crisis is a negative event for most organizations. All types of organizational crises, however, do not become attributions of blame. In past studies of crisis management, a type of crisis inducing publics' blame to an organization is considered as a controllable or an intentional crisis, and irresponsible crisis response is also an attribution of blame. For instances, the recent crises such as Mattel Toy, Peanut Butter, Chinese Infant Formula Recall are obvious controllable crises, and consumers and publics threw harsh blame to those companies. Terrorism such as the 911 crisis in 2001 is evident as an intentional crisis, and it brings people's blame and punishment. In fact, such blame is cognitively driven by people's moral judgment.

At times, a crisis response would be judged immoral by publics. If an organization facing a crisis used a defensive response (i.e. denial or excuse) under the condition of intentional or controllable crisis rather than accommodative responses (i.e. apology), it would be target of blame. When SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) broke out in 2003, Hong Kong government lost the public trust because of lack of transparency in crisis communication (Lee, 2009). The Hong Kong government made an effort to minimize SARS outbreak and scold media for exaggerating the situation. Firestone Defect Tire in 2000, resulting in 148 death and injuries over 500, might a good example that Firestone's responding to the crisis was considered to be immoral or unethical. When Firestone was accused of the problem, they had finger point toward customers and auto company (Ford), and shifted the blame to them until National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) found the evidence that 46.4% percent of the problem tires were the Firestone brand. Currently, Toyota's irresponsible crisis response also induced severe criticism by consumers, media, and U.S. government. During a crisis, an organization makes every effort to minimize cost driven by a crisis. To do that, sometimes an organization choose an immoral option such as hiding the fact, addressing wrong information, shifting blame, or searching a scapegoat. As an organizational crisis response is judged to be immoral, the organization would not be forgiven from publics and obtain harsh blame.

To explore the role of moral judgment in crisis evaluation, this study addresses the following research questions:

R1. How does a crisis type relate to moral judgment?

R2. How does a crisis response type relate to moral judgment?

As already mentioned, moral judgment might be a significant predictor of blame. Blame is a matter of judgment driven by moral decision. Wible(2009) argues that moral judgment about whether an organizational behavior is right or wrong gives rise to blame or praise. The organization are praised for the good, blamed for the bad (Gilbert, 2006).

H1. Moral judgment will significantly predict blame.

II. Method

1. Design and Stimulus

This study used a 2 (crisis types: controllable vs. uncontrollable) X 2 (crisis response strategies: excuse vs. apology) between subject design. Four scenarios were created with different combinations of causal attributions. For each scenario, a case of a fire in an electronic power corporation was used because it is a general issue that could happen in everyday life. The condition for controllable indicated that the organization caused the fire, but the condition for uncontrollable was created by a natural disaster. To check manipulation effectiveness for crisis types, people were asked the following questions adopted by Lee's (2005) measurements: (1) "To what degree did you think the organization could prevent the incidents?" on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from 1 (not at all preventable by the organization) to 7 (absolutely preventable by the organization); and (2) "To what degree did you think the organization had control over the incident?" on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from 1 (not at all controllable by the organization) to 7 (totally controllable by the organization). Reliability for the two items was Chronbach's $\alpha = .89$, and the two items were summed and averaged to compute an overall value. Each mean value was 5.64 (SD = 1.19) for the controllable crisis and 3.51 (SD = 1.52) for the uncontrollable crisis. Independent t-test showed that the controllable crisis type was significantly higher in the score than the uncontrollable crisis, $t(298) = 13.484$, $p = .000$ (2-tailed), which means that the manipulation was effective.

Two crisis response strategies (excuse & apology) were adapted from Coombs and Holladay

(1996). Excuse means that an organization seeks to minimize responsibility for the crisis event, and the organization admits a crisis event, but bears little of the responsibility for the crisis. Apology indicates acceptance of responsibility for the crisis and asks its forgiveness for the crisis. Some compensation may be included with the apology (see Table 1).

2. Sample and Procedure

Three hundred undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses were selected. Of the 300 participants, 40.7% were male ($n = 122$), and 58% were female ($n = 174$), with an average age of 20.51 ($SD = 2.15$). Four participants did not identify their gender. Each participant received a randomly assigned questionnaire that described one crisis scenario. They were told that they are going to read one piece of news cut from the newspaper. The piece of news described a fire, its cause, and the organizational response to the crisis. Participants were then asked to respond to a set of questions.

3. Measurement Scales

1) Moral judgment about an organization

To measure participants' moral judgment of an organization, the following items were adopted from Krcmar and Curtis (2003) and revised; (a) "Do you think that the organization is immoral?," (b) "Do you think that the organization is dishonest?," and (c) "Do you think that the organization is unethical?" with responses recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale (Strongly agree - Strongly disagree). Reliability analysis for these 3 items measuring moral judgment resulted in a Chronbach's α value of .94.

2) Blame

This study used Griffin, Babin, and Darden's (1992) four-item scale for measuring blame. The four items were (a) "How much do you blame the corporation for the fire?" with a 7-point Likert-type scale (None - Totally), (b) "Circumstances, not the organization, are responsible for the crisis," (c) "The blame for the crisis lies with the organization," and (d) "The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not the organization" with a 7-point Likert-type scale (Strongly

agree - Strongly disagree). Prior crisis management studies have used the items of the blame scales, and have found high reliability for the items (Coombs, 1998, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2002; Lee, 2005). Items (b) and (d) were reverse coded. Reliability analysis for measuring blame yielded Chronbach's α value of .84.

3) Moral development

It has been argued that individual differences in morality exist (Gilligan, 1982; Hogan, 1973; Lifton; 1985), and the individual difference might influence their moral judgment on an organization involved in a crisis. To investigate individual differences, numerous studies have used Kohlberg's (1981) model of moral judgment. This model suggests that an individual progresses through a series of stages in the development of morality. The first stage is the pre-conventional level that is found in children and involves egoistic consideration of self-interest in resolving moral decisions. The second stage is the conventional level involving considerations of the welfare of others and of society in general. The highest stage is the post-conventional level and is based on considerations of the rights of various group regardless of existing societal norms or laws. Each level is comprised of two stages of moral development (Rest, 1979) (see Table 2). To control individual difference in morality, this study examined individual moral level through measuring the DIT (Defining Issue Test). Based on Kohlberg's model of moral judgment, Rest (1979) developed the DIT to provide a pencil-and-paper means of measuring an individual's level of moral development. The DIT measurement is expanded is from the MJI (Moral Judgment Interview) (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). When administering the DIT, a study participant is presented with either three (short-form DIT) or six (original DIT) moral dilemmas, and each dilemma is followed by a set of twelve statements. This study used the short-form DIT (see Table 3). The subject is asked to rate each statement for its importance in making their ethical judgment. After rating the twelve statements, the subject is then asked to select the four most important statements and rank-order them from one to four. The P-score has been the most widely used index, which indicates the relative importance a subject gives to principled moral consideration in making a decision about moral dilemmas. The P-score is usually expressed in terms of a percentage, and can range from 0 to 95. The P-index has shown the most consistent reliability and validity trends of any index based on DIT (Rest, 1986). The P-score corresponds to stages 5 and 6 among Kohlberg's six stages of cognitive moral development. The DIT P-score computed for each participant had a mean value of 19.01 (SD = 19.04), ranging from 0.00 to 61.9. The P-score from

the sample showed that, except for a few participants in stage 6, the rest were in stage 5 in moral development (5 stage = P score > 50 and 6 stage = P score ≤ 49).

III. Results

R1: Controllability and moral judgment about an organization. Research question one explored how participants who read a scenario in which a crisis is controllable judged the organization comparing participants who read a scenario including an uncontrollable crisis. Three items utilizing 7-point Likert-type response scale were used, and scores on the three items were summed and averaged to compute an overall moral judgment score. Each group (controllable vs. uncontrollable) reported a mean in moral judgment score, 3.12 (SD = 1.34) and 4.04 (SD = 1.84), respectively. To explore the research question, Independent T-test was performed and yielded a statistically significant difference in moral judgment between controllable and uncontrollable groups, $t = -6.28$, $p < .001$. Thus, participants exposed to the controllable crisis judged the organization less moral than did participants exposed to the uncontrollable crisis.

R2. Crisis response types and moral judgment. The second research questions explored that how an organization's crisis response influences participants' moral judgment on the organization. This study used two crisis response types (excuse vs. apology). Participants read a scenario including one type of crisis response. Then, T-test procedure was performed with moral judgment as a dependent variable. Again, the analysis revealed a statistically significant difference, $t = -3.86$, $p < .01$ between excuse (M = 3.29, SD = 1.24) and apology (M = 4.00, SD = 1.34), such that defensive crisis response was perceived as less moral than an accommodative response.

In addition, to see the combined effects of crisis types and crisis response type on the moral judgement, univariate analysis using spss was conducted. The findings showed that each independent variable had a significant main effect: crisis type ($F = .15.19$, $p < .001$) and crisis response type ($F = 15.55$, $p < .001$). However, there was no significant interaction effect between those variable ($F(1, 200) = .34$, $p = .55$).

H1. Moral judgment and blame. Hypothesis one predicted that moral judgment will be a significant predictor of blame. To test the hypothesis, linear regression was performed, and the finding yield that moral judgment significantly predicted amount of blame, $\beta = .55$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$. Moral judgment explained 30% of variance in amount of blame. Thus, moral judgment on an organization involving a crisis positively affected the blame.

In addition, individual difference in morality was barely appeared in this study, and there was no significant difference in moral judgment between stage 5 and stage 6 in moral development. The profile of the sample of this study tells the reason for the result because of all the total participants: 97.1% were in stage 5, and 2.9% were in stage 6 in moral development, and even the range of P-index was from 0 to 61.9 (stage 5 = P score \leq 49 and stage 6 = P score $>$ 50).

IV. Discussion

For crisis types, the controllable crisis provoked more negative moral judgment than uncontrollable, which indicated that crisis type is an attribution by which people make moral judgments on an organization about the crisis. In addition, crisis response type was an important attribution of moral judgment. More defensive crisis response type (excuse) induced negative moral judgment than accommodative one (apology). Finally, as expected, this study proved that moral judgment was a significant predictor of blame.

These findings provide rationale of how people assign blame to an organization causing a crisis. Moral judgment links causal attributions including crisis response strategies to blame. In practice, the discovery of the role of moral judgment in people's crisis evaluation helps crisis managers understand and recognize accurate process of people's crisis evaluation and to plan an appropriate and effective crisis response strategy. Of course, people's moral judgment on an organization regarding a crisis type is out of the organization's hand because it's already happened. The moral judgment on crisis response type, however, is manageable by the organization through considering an ethical response to a crisis. The ethical response will help publics understand what happened, why and what actions have been taken or will be taken (Gower, 2006). For example, using excuse in a controllable crisis presents dishonest and unethical as proved in this study. Reversely, full apology or corrective action to the controllable crisis is judged as honest and ethical action. The negative moral judgment from publics leads apparently to their assignment of blame to an organization. Thus, ethical consideration in determining an appropriate strategic response should be included in the crisis management plan.

While this research offers contributions to the crisis management literature, there are some limitations as well. First, participants were drawn from a convenience sample of students who is not a general target for crisis managers, and using a student sample has limitations in generalizing findings. Second, the scenario, the organization, and causes employed in the

experiment were all fictitious or less-familiar stimuli provided for greater experimental control. The use of an existing organization or different case might have an unexplained difference. Regarding the existing organization, prior reputation or image might be another factor influencing public's evaluation on the organization's crisis. Third, this research did not control individual differences in terms of issue involvement. People who are sensitive to or highly involved in the case used in this study might present a different response to the organization. These conditional factors discussed above should be considered in the future research. Finally, individual difference in moral development level was not appeared because of limitations of age and educational distribution. Age and educational level are the critical factors differentiating moral development level according to past studies of morality (Hann, 1978; Lifton; 1985), but participants in this study were on the similar age ranging from 19 to 22 and the same education level. Thus, a wide range of age groups and education levels is needed for further study.

Appendix

<Table 1> Conditions for casual attribution

Factors in Study	Manipulation
Controllable	A fast-moving fire tore through an electronic power corporation in Suffolk early Sunday, killing 20 employees and injuring 40 others, police and fire officials said. Authorities said that their investigation into the fire indicated that the blaze was caused by a faulty circuit breaker that must have been last inspected at least two years ago.
Uncontrollable	A fast-moving fire tore through an electronic power corporation in Suffolk early Sunday, killing 20 employees and injuring 40 others, police and fire officials said. Authorities said that their investigation into the fire indicated that the blaze was ignited because of a fear from a lightning strike from bad weather.
Excuse	In responding to the incident, Mr. XXX, the president of the corporation said, "Obviously, this incident is not our responsibility."
Apology	In responding to the incident, Mr. XXX, the president of the corporation said, "We are very sorry and express our deep-felt apology to the victims and their families, and we will do all that we can to compensate them."

<Table 2> Six Stages in Moral Development

Three Levels	Six Stages	General concept for determining moral rights and responsibilities
Level 1: Pre-conventional	stage 1	The morality of obedience: "Do what you're told"
	Stage 2	The morality of instrumental egoism and simple exchange: "Let's make deal"
Level 2: Conventional	Stage 3	The morality of interpersonal concordance: "Be considerate, nice, and kind and you'll get along with people."
	Stage 4	The morality of law and duty to the social order "Everyone in society is obligated and protected by the law"
Level 3: Post-conventional	Stage 5	The morality of societal consensus: "You are obligated by whatever arrangement are agreed to by due process procedure."
	Stage 6	The Morality of non-arbitrary social cooperation: "How rational and impartial people would organize cooperation is moral."

An Example of DIT Test

Social Problem

The following questions are concerned with how you define the issues in a social problem. Three stories about social problems will be described. After each story, there will be a list of questions. The questions that follow each story represent different issues that might be raised by the problem. In other words, the questions/issues raise different ways of judging what is important in making a decision about the social problem. You will be asked to rate and rank the questions in terms of how important each one seems to you.

Here is an example of the task:

Frank Jones has been thinking about buying a car. He is married, has two small children, and earns an average income. The car he buys will be his family's only car. It will be used mostly to get to work and drive around town, but also sometimes for vacation trips. In trying to decide what car to buy, Frank Jones realized that there were a lot of questions to consider. Below is a list of some of these questions.

If you were Frank Jones, how important would each of these questions be in deciding what car to buy?

Assume that you thought that item #1 (below) was of great importance, item #2 had some importance, and item #3 had no importance, #4 had much importance, and item #5 had much importance. Then you would mark the blank on the answer sheet as shown below.

Statements	Great	Much	Some	Little	No
1. Whether the color was green, Frank's favorite color.	V				
2. Whether the car dealer was in the same block as where Frank lives?			V		
3. Whether the cubic inch displacement was at least 200?					V
4. Would be a large, roomy car better than a compact car?		V			
5. Would be a used car be more economical in the long run than a new car?		V			

Further, the questionnaire will ask you to rank the questions in terms of importance. In the space below, the numbers at the top, 1 through 5, represent the item number. From top to bottom, you are asked to select a number that represents the item in first importance (of those given you

to chose from), then second most important, third most important, and fourth most important. Please indicate your top four choices. You might select a number as follow:

Most Important #_1_

Second Important #_5_

Third most important #_4_

Fourth most important #_2_

Note that in the stories that follow, there will be 12 items for each story, not five. Please make sure to consider all 12 items (questions) that are printed after each story.

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Moral Judgment and Blame in Crisis Management

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This study investigated how people make moral judgments toward an organization involved in a crisis based on crisis types and crisis response types. To test it, the study employed 2 (control vs. uncontrolled) crisis types x 2 (excuse vs. apology) crisis response types between-subject design. The findings indicated that crisis types and crisis responses influenced participants' moral judgment, and excuse in both crises type was judged much immoral than using apology. In addition, moral judgment significantly predicted blame.

Key words: crisis type, crisis response type, moral judgment, blame.