

Conceptualising Crisis: Events, Crisis Processes and Collective Sensemaking

Crisis is an opaque term, applicable to a range of different domains and practices. Its origins lie in the progression and treatment of disease, where crisis indicates a turning point at which the disease becomes more serious (Kamei, 2018). Central to many definitions that are shared across different disciplines is that a crisis is an unexpected disruption that will, or is perceived by some, to lead to adverse outcomes. In sociology and political science, a crisis is characterised as a 'period of discontinuity, marking the breaking point in a patterned process of linearity' (Boin, 2005).

Crises and their effects have been conceptualised at the different levels at which they occur. First, is the micro level. These are crises that affect or are a result of errors made by an individual. Next, is the meso level, which are the crises that impact on organisations or are a consequence of organisational failures. Finally, there is the macro level. Crises that have widespread repercussions for society. The focus for this chapter is these crises that have a wider societal impact. While some may appear more limited in their geographic or temporal latitudes, with their acute impacts experienced by a particular state or country, many reflect the accumulation and intersection of vulnerabilities that lead to crisis. This includes those that connect to or are a consequence of global challenges, the climate crisis, pandemic risks and structural inequalities for example.

This chapter seeks to illuminate the concept of crisis. It addresses questions concerning the nature of crisis, their different forms, and the underlying processes and actors that shape crisis and their outcomes. To this end it begins by evaluating the contrasting definitions and the common characteristics of crises. At a macro level a crisis is often understood as a disruptive event or process that will have a significant impact on society. These may be slow burning, evolving gradually and over time, environmental degradation or persistent conflict are two evident examples here, and, as a consequence, there may be uncertainty about the appropriate course of action (Nohrstedt 2008). Others, such as disaster or financial shocks, are characterised as acute events. While this typology of crises is well established within the literature, it is unable to encompass the breadth of risks, vulnerabilities and underpinning processes that precipitate crisis.

This chapter also considers the social construction of crisis and the extent to which crisis and their impacts are products of collective sense-making process. This approach

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acknowledges how the interests of claims-makers may be advanced in defining and issue or event as a crisis and thereby necessitating intervention (Spector, 2019). The boundaries and narrative to a crisis are socially constructed. A consequence of the negotiation between different actors about appropriate courses of action. Significantly, the media are integral to these processes by giving voice to different actors, reproducing or challenging elite discourse and presenting different policy choices.

In addressing these two broad aims, the discussion will draw on recent examples of crises affecting the UK, including the crisis processes of extremism and terrorism, those brought into focus by the disaster at Grenfell and Brexit referendum.

Crisis Events

The orthodox view is that crises are events that possess ‘the characteristics of threat’ and as consequence it is these unexpected happenings that often become the focus for analysis (Spector, 2019). The types of event that may constitute a crisis are extensive. Some distinguish between internal and external events. At a state or societal level, an internal crisis arises from political conditions, conflict or internal hazards that lead to adverse impacts for residents and communities. External events are those that those cut across geographical terrain and are transitional in their scope, a major disaster event, external conflict or financial collapse, such as that triggered by subprime mortgage lending and the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008.

The central critique of the crisis as events model is that a crisis is seldom the result of a single isolated event and often derive from the interactions between different happenings or are the manifestation of underlying process and vulnerabilities. To borrow from the related concept of disaster, Pescaroli et al., (2018) explore how disasters often cascade, with a natural or human-induced hazard event interacting with other events to create adverse impacts. A trigger for a cascading crisis, and one that will have wider societal impacts, may be characterised as an external event and one that is outside of the authority of the state, the emergence of a novel virus, for example, or volatility within the international financial markets. This external event may interact with those internal to state, a change in government following disputed or inconclusive election result, for instance, that creates further instability. Others go beyond the notion of cascades to conceptualise crises or disaster

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events that extend further than ‘national political boundaries’ and have no clear point of origin as Trans Social System Ruptures (TSSRs) (Quarantelli, Lagadec and Boin, 2018). These are the crises that have global resonance and can disrupt ‘multiple systems that operate across national borders’ (Wachtendorf, 2009).

The crisis as discrete events approach also seeks to reflect their temporal characteristics, describing both fast and slow-burning crisis events. Fast crisis are the sudden disruptive shocks, the low probability yet high-impact events. At a societal level these are the unexpected and significant events. Slow-burning crisis are those that evolve gradually, exemplified by underfunding of healthcare resources, unemployment, inequality and environmental degradation. Their future impacts cannot be foreseen, yet overtime may accrue and will come into focus at critical moments. It is these periods of discontinuity and the events that follow, rather than their underlying processes, that become the focus for attention. Therefore, when people take to the street to protest against inequality and injustice, it the events that may have precipitated this action or the collective action that become defined and understood as crisis. This highlights the limitations of the crisis as events model. A narrow focus on events draws attention away from the underlying crisis processes. There are also many critical moments that will fail to register as significant disruptions and as a consequence there is lack of coordinated responses to addresses these conditions (Seabrooke and Tsingou, 2019).

The crisis as event approach also recognises the implications of place and proximity for understanding a crisis and their impacts. Events are often considered as arising from and impacting on a geographically defined area. Distance is also a variable that determines how an event is perceived. The fire that destroyed Grenfell Tower block in South London in 2017 may, within the events paradigm, be characterised as limited in its geographic scope and to those communities directly affected by this tragic event. This disaster, however, also represented a crisis moment for the United Kingdom. It served to illuminate issues of governance concerning the built environment, in particular in respect of fire safety, but also the issues of inequality and deprivation. As a crisis, it also fed into wider political debates about the incumbent prime minister, Theresa May’s, leadership and the consequences of the UK’s fiscal austerity programme. A subsequent public enquiry into this event was initiated, which is ongoing and at the time of writing is yet to report. As a critical juncture, the Grenfell crisis, connected and shed light on these different processes.

Crisis Processes

A crisis such as that presented by the Grenfell Tower fire highlight the limitations of the crisis-as-event model. It fails to recognise the complexity and interactions between different processes that can become known and constituted as crisis.

An alternative conceptualization is that for the state or society a crisis may represent a period of critical transformation (Hay, 1999) or a progressive process that may not be restricted to one area within a common border (Mikušová and Horváthová, 2019: 1847). A crisis may initially be disruptive with adverse effects but will also facilitate opportunities for positive change.

Another view, and one that is outlined further in this chapter is that a crisis is the product of crisis processes (Boin, 2005). It is necessary, then, to turn our attention to these and understand how these processes and their interactions, rather than events, may lead to adverse outcomes. Some have argued that crisis processes are difficult to isolate and define. They are sometimes imperceptible until they begin to emerge as a threat to society (Rosenthal et al., 2001: 7 cited in Boin, 2005). Buckle, (2005), consequently, characterises these processes as open-ended. They are more than a sequence of interrelated and cascading events but instead are the deep-seated, protracted and complex phenomena that intersect and give rise to uncertainty. These processes are broad and multifaceted but include, deprivation and development inequalities, ecological and environmental destruction, declining legitimacy and public trust in institutions and shifts in public attitudes and values.

Simon Cottle (2009) has advanced the notion of global crisis, as threats that are transnational in their scope and emerge as a feature of globalisation and increasingly complexity. These global crises are beyond the prerogative and capacity of national governments to respond and require coordinated international solutions. The climate crisis, financial collapse, forcible population movements and poverty are illustrative of global crises that persist and cannot be understood as exceptional events. A flood, therefore, may be constructed and understood as a single 'natural' hazard event, yet flooding and its impacts will be due to ongoing, dynamic and interconnected processes of change and destabilisation, such as rising sea-levels, urbanisation and poor infrastructure.

To offer a further example. The refugee and migrant crisis as it become known and constructed in discourse is underpinned by a series of interrelated and non-linear crisis processes. To understand the nature of this crisis it is necessary to consider the push and pull factors that cause migration. People may be forced by conflict or persecution to leave their home, and as refugees are seeking safety and security. The crisis processes, therefore, are those push factors that compel people to leave, the most common of which are war, conflict and political, religious or social persecution (Armed Conflict Survey, 2019). Other factors that contribute to human insecurity, natural hazards, hunger and famine and increasingly climate change, also cause forcibly displacement of populations and as such are the crisis processes that drive migration. Political instability and governmental collapse can lead to the persecution of groups in society. In turn this can contribute to further violence and conflict. As has been witnessed in Syria, the root causes of public grievances towards regimes in the Middle East and North Africa region, were complex and multifaceted, including political repression, economic inequality, corruption, unemployment, and youth demographics. These also are illustrative of the continual or transformational processes that contribute to crisis.

The pull factors that explain migration, which include seeking better employment opportunities, education or social reasons, may also be defined as crisis processes. Global inequalities, in particular in terms of wages and employment opportunities, are significant drivers of migration patterns. Migration then is also a consequence of the structural imbalances within the international system and this represents a crisis processes that creates and sustains these disparities.

Crisis processes may occur spontaneously, but most can be characterised as persistent and longstanding issues. Boin, Ekengren and Rhinard (2020: 123) introduce the notion of creeping crises, which are non-linear processes that will ‘demonstrate small bursts of acceleration’ and then are followed by ‘periods of stasis or reversal.’ This represents a point at which a crisis process may reach a tipping point and necessitating interventions from policy actors. One criticism of such responses is that they often seek to address the symptoms that these processes create, rather than the underlying issues themselves, which often recur and create further crises (Bernanke, Geithner, & Paulson, 2019 cited in Boin, Ekengren and Rhinard, 2020). A similar line of argument has been advocated when considering the antecedent conditions for disaster, with disasters only made visible when they have reached a critical moment. Disasters, therefore, result from the intersection of hazards and persistent

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vulnerabilities and it is necessary to reconfigure notions of disaster (Matthews and Thorsen, 2020).

Some argue that complexity, their transborder characteristics and pervasive nature of such process mean that periods of exceptions and crisis have become the norm (Agamben 2005). Others have described contemporary society as marked by a state of permanent crisis (Beck, 1992).

It is necessary to acknowledge that the process view of crisis is not without critique. Processes by their definition reach into and across all domains from economic, social, institutional, political and cultural. Crisis processes also, as has been argued, intersect with and are affected by others. It is, therefore, difficult to isolate and develop solutions when they may be so all encompassing.

Sensemaking and the Construction of Crisis

Thus far the discussion of crisis has centred on crisis as objective and verifiable events or process. More explicitly that crisis and what constitutes a crisis is uncontested. The reality, however, is that crises are social constructions and subject to sensemaking process. That is not to say that crises may represent a real, present and longstanding threat to the state or society but that what becomes constituted as crisis and how they are presented is often disputed. Some crises or crisis processes fail to register, others, may be constructed as a such by groups whose interests are served by this definition, for example. If an event or issue is constructed as a crisis, it necessitates forms of action, interventions, or policies to meet the perceived threat or vulnerability. It is to this important debate that the chapter now turns.

Social constructionist approaches recognise how crises are defined and legitimised by social actors (Gergen 1985). They acknowledge that the social world is not objective but has subjective meaning (Berger and Luckman, 1991). Moreover, these social construction processes are situated within the social, historical and cultural contexts that shape discourse (Fairclough, 1993). It is possible, therefore, to argue that a crisis is a social construct. It is the negotiation between different actors and the contexts in which meanings are produced that determine what becomes known and constituted as a crisis and the narratives or frames through which they are communicated.

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Spector (2019: 276-277) proposes the 'crisis as claims' model to outline the social construction of crises. In this framework a crisis will be established by 'claims makers', those who define a problem and may do so to advance their own interests. By describing an event or process as a crisis, these actors 'exercise their power to raise awareness, focus attention, and devote resources towards some matters and away from others.' This model, as within other domains of social construction, is concerned with power and how it is deployed through what is defined, communicated and understood as crisis. For those crises affecting the state, our attention is focused on the social, political and institutional actors that hold power within these systems.

Communication is central to understanding social construction and its processes (Burr, 2015). Language is both a tool for understanding the social world but also for constructing meaning. Therefore, language is not neutral and cannot be separated from its social and cultural context. The communicative choices that are made, how issues and events are presented, justified and framed, of through the use of particular linguistic constructs, such as the use of metaphors or labels, can serve to construct and reconstruct a crisis narrative.

Within the discourses on crisis their urgency has been underlined by the use of alternative constructs. An event may be described as an emergency or a permanent crisis, which implies that their severity and immediacy are of greater concern than other issues or events. In a similar way, Marchese (2011) described the deployment of the oxymoron, 'a permanent emergency' to describe a failure to address the issues of housing and extreme poverty in Argentina. In recent years there has also been a shift in public discourse away from the term climate change to reference the climate crisis or emergency when describing the process and consequences of global warming. This is reflected in the way many national and local governments have made climate emergency declarations and the adoption of the expression 'climate emergency.', The Guardian newspaper's style guide was updated in 2019 to reflect this change, explaining that climate emergency" would be its preferred term to "better reflect the scientific consensus that this was a catastrophe for humanity" (Carrington, 2019).

The rhetoric of emergency is a call to action, accentuating the need for a response and a commitment from policy makers. As a discursive construct an emergency can advocate the need for special measures, powers that are often enacted and legitimised in response to series threats to the state. The introduction of emergency powers and the extension of the

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state security apparatus in European countries in response to terrorist attacks through 2016 and 2017, were justified as necessary to mitigate the risk posed by terrorism. Many have argued that these measures were disproportionate, illustrated, for example, by the discourse on returning foreign fighters that has contributed to the securitisation of migration and border control within European states (Baker-Beall, 2019).

In response to Covid-19, governments across the world have enacted a raft of measures to curb the spread of the virus, including the introduction of emergency legislation that has placed unprecedented limitations on businesses and people's freedom of movement and assembly. As with terrorism before, Agamben (2005; 2020) has argued that the extension of state powers in response to Covid-19 demonstrates how emergencies have become situations of exception that have been used to expand the powers of the state. Other theorists refute this idea, contending that the human, social and economic toll of Coronavirus show that Coronavirus is a real and significant health crisis and government interventions, many of which were temporary, were necessary to save lives and to safeguard public health systems (Walby, 2021).

Some have argued that in the discursive construction of terrorism and Covid-19, the language of emergency or crisis has heightened the need for such special measures. Despite the debates about the proportionality of responses, such presentations contribute to public anxiety about these crises and may enhance support for emergency interventions. Critiques of government responses to terrorism (Jackson, 2005) and the Covid-19 health emergency (Agamben, 2020) have claimed their construction as permanent emergencies are illustrative of these dynamics.

Rather than being manufactured, crises can be understood as both real but also socially constructed (Beck, 1999). As Walby (2021: 35) argues, a crisis will have disputed 'origins and remedies', its narrative will be contested and there will be a 'struggle over its meaning and implications.' Media are integral to these processes of sense-making. By deciding what makes the news and how issues and events are presented to their audiences, news media are a source of symbolic reality. This process is the consequence of interactions between different levels of discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993), such as the socio-political and cultural contexts in which news is produced but also the professional practices and values of journalism (Schudson, 1978). Kotišová (2019), argues, then that journalism and journalists are not separate from but integral to the construction of crisis.

Visibility and absence:

Crises are made visible through news media. The discussion above demonstrates how significant disruptive events, in contrast to slow-burning issues, are more likely to become constituted as a crisis. Even if we only consider events as manifestations of crisis processes, those deemed significant in one context may not resonate in others. There are different explanations that can be offered for the visibility and absence of these crises in media. Some emphasise the systemic factors that influence international news coverage. Global economic and media systems, such as the presence of news agencies, determine that events that impact on countries that sit at the top of these hierarchies, often Western countries, are more likely to receive coverage (Wu, 2003). This leads to greater attention afforded to crisis that affect these countries and their interests (Himmelboim, Chang, and McCreedy, 2010). For crises affecting lower-income countries, it is only when they reach a threshold in terms of their significance, magnitude and scale of their impacts that they register for international media (Alexander, 2005: 27; Gans, 1980).

News values, including geographic and cultural proximity, influence what makes the news. Stories that are perceived to be distant from and therefore of less relevance to audiences will only be reported when they have wider regional or global significance. Proximity explains why European media afforded widespread coverage of the shootings at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015. Yet, the deaths of 2,000 people in Baga, northern Nigeria, following attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram, received very little international news coverage. Both events, however, reflected the persistent security crisis of terrorism and violent extremism. Commercial imperatives, editorial decisions, limitations in resources and professional practices of journalism also contribute to the visibility and absence of events and processes, and as consequence what may become constituted as crisis.

Elite sources

Journalists due to practical considerations but also the cultural authority and credibility they afford to news reports will often defer to official or elite sources (Crow and Boycoff, 2014). This privileged position allows these sources to act as the primary definers of news events,

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enabling them to shape agendas and to establish the parameters of debate around issues and events. (Hall et al., 2013).

Elite sources include representatives of the government, political elites and business. Journalists, therefore, will take the lead from these sources. While recent studies present a more nuanced assessment of the influence of these sources, demonstrating how digital media has enhanced the diversity of sources that have access to the media (Barnoy and Reich, 2021), elites sources still dominate in many areas and in particular in coverage of crisis and matters of security (Larsen, 2018).

Significantly, during periods of instability and crisis, the media operate in what Hallin (1986) describes as 'a sphere of consensus', where those that may seek to present different views and policy choices are not afforded access to the media. Media, therefore, tend to reproduce the official narrative to issues and events and there is a narrower range of sources that have access to the media. What becomes constituted as crisis will reflect elite discourse and how crises are constructed and interpreted by elites. It also may constrain the extent that opposing views or criticisms of crisis response are recognised. Jarvis (2021) identifies how the language of crisis evolved through UK government discourses on Covid-19, where it was depicted as a national emergency, a global crisis and the most severe moment threat to the UK since the Second World War. This narrative was, consequently, reproduced in media and public discourse, mirroring this elite framing of this crisis.

Narrative of crisis

News media can adopt the language of elites, thereby acting as secondary definers of crisis. Through the selective decisions that are made when presenting stories and issues to their audiences they are also able to amplify and reconstruct discourses of crisis. These include the types of stories that journalists select but also the narratives that are used to engage their audiences, for example those that may focus on individual human-interest stories or emphasise conflict or discord. These narratives can reflect universal story forms (Kitch, 2003) but are also a consequence of journalism practices and how stories are translated and packaged for audiences. A crisis, therefore, could be framed as such in news accounts to illustrate its significance. For the UK, Brexit was a significant moment, a constitutional crisis, as some described it (Wincott, Davies and Wager, 2019). It also drawn as a crisis in news

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accounts as it reflected and created discord in society. Scholars have shown, therefore, that the construction of Brexit in the UK media was a function of the language and rhetoric of crisis, one that was articulated by elites, illustrated by both Leave and Remain sides of the referendum debate, but one that was also reconstructed through the media. This was evident in the way 'social and cultural differences between' the typical representations of supporters of the two different positions were presented through media coverage and served to reproduce the polarising debates that characterised the referendum campaign (Zapettini and Kryzanowski, 2019). A narrative to the crisis that continued through and beyond the UK's subsequent withdrawal from European Union in December 2020.

Media can also sensationalise or adopt crisis frames. The use of emotive language, rhetoric, headlines or images for example, can facilitate the construction of crisis. This is not to say that media work in a vacuum but that it is the features of news discourse that may underline their severity and contribute to these processes of sensemaking.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the concept of crisis and their social construction. In evaluating the different typologies of crisis, it has been shown that crises are often understood as disruptive events. In reality, they are often a symptom of crisis processes, the persistent and longstanding issues that create vulnerabilities. While events are significant, as critical moments that become the focus for attention, they are often symptomatic of long-standing issues. As such, they may function as tipping points when recognition and intervention become necessary.

It has also sought to demonstrate how crises are social constructions and subject to collective sensemaking processes. What becomes known and constructed as a crisis may reflect the interests of dominant groups. Moreover, the frames or narratives through which they are communicated, and the meaning implications of crisis are often uncertain. In the UK, this has been evident in the complex and fractured narratives to the longstanding crisis processes of terrorism and extremist violence and, more recently, those illuminated by the disaster at Grenfell and through Brexit.

This chapter has argued that the media are integral to these processes of sense making. To illustrate this the it has highlighted factors both external and internal to journalism that

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may contribute to the social construction of crisis. These may be through providing visibility to crisis processes, through prioritising the perspectives of elites, and in the reproduction of dominant narratives and representations of crisis.

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