

**AN EXTENDED RHETORICAL TYPOLOGY OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION:
MANAGING THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CLERGY SEX ABUSE CRISIS**

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ABSTRACT:

The focus in this paper is on extending current understandings of the communicative construction of crises. By adapting Linell's (1998) focus on the balance between initiatives and responses to crisis communication, this study extends traditional understandings of the offensive and defensive orientation to crisis communication. What emerges is a hybrid typology of crisis communication orientations, including offensive-initiatives (i.e., being the first to levy an attack), offensive-responses (i.e., responding to another's discourse with an attack), defensive-initiatives (i.e., using a preemptive defense), and defensive-responses (i.e., responding defensively to an attack).

When applied to the clergy sex abuse crisis, this typology reveals ways in which each organization either offsets or compounds any weakness in its rhetorical position. In particular, the USCCB offsets the weakness inherent in its defensive position by leveraging initiatives. VOTF less successfully attempts to offset the weakness inherent in its responsive orientation by engaging offensive discourse. In addition to sharing this strategy, SNAP employs what might be deemed the typical rhetorical strategy of attack: offensive-initiative discourse. This approach allows SNAP to advance its agenda for crisis-related issues.

It is important to note that the focus on how multiple stakeholder organizations treat the potential for interactivity is relevant to crisis situations well beyond the clergy abuse crisis. Indeed, it is relevant to any organization interested in adapting its crisis management to the responses of key stakeholders. It could also be extended to indicate reasons organizational crises become intractable or evolve in particular ways. As public relations researchers broaden their focus beyond managerial strategies to larger situational variables (e.g., the presence of alternate voices and discourses), and as they continue the trend to explore co-creational theories of PR, such approaches are essential.

THE CRISIS

In the winter of 2002, *The Boston Globe* published an exposé on clergy sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. Although this was not the first time U.S. Catholic priests were accused of sexual exploitation, this was the first time that substantive allegations of systemic complicity were levied publicly against the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the United States. During the weeks and months following the initial exposé, there was a swell of media attention, a growing public outcry, increasing litigation over alleged abuse and cover-ups, and the emergence of issue-driven grassroots organizations. Escalating public involvement with the issue of clergy sexual abuse challenged the U.S. Catholic bishops' attempts to internalize and thus retain exclusive control of the situation. As the U.S. Roman Catholic hierarchy lost exclusive jurisdiction over the situation, it became clear that sexual exploitation by priests could no longer be delimited as a few isolated incidents in the Boston Archdiocese. It had escalated into an international organizational crisis.

Not only was the hierarchy repeatedly confronted with allegations of systemic complicity with abuse, but its attempts to manage the crisis were contested vigorously by a variety of stakeholders. The early *Globe* articles paved the way for an increasingly audible public discourse on the phenomena of clergy sexual abuse. Key stakeholders weighing in on the issue include grassroots groups focused on supporting those victimized by clergy (advocacy groups) and on changing the Church (dissent groups), individuals alleging sexual exploitation (victims/survivors) and their families, civil and criminal courts, members of the laity and the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and a wide variety of media. These stakeholders have found expression in many venues, from

depositions to press releases, from promotional materials to newsletters, from books to conferences, from media releases to personal letters, from court briefs to news reports, from protests to petitions, from movies to interviews, and so on.

Despite the vocal involvement of numerous stakeholders in the crisis, the hierarchy's communicative response to the situation has followed relatively traditional crisis management strategies (i.e., apologia and image restoration discourse) with the goal of single-handedly 'resolving' the crisis. This communication (in the form of policies, homilies, surveys, press releases, self-audits, meetings, apologies, etc.) has sought to deny, minimize, remediate, and control the crisis, all under the exclusive auspices of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. This discursive position stands in contrast to other stakeholders' attempts to defer closure, draw out underlying issues, amplify non-dominant voices, contest dominant interpretations, and collaborate on possible solutions. What has emerged, then, since the winter of 2002 is an on-going situation in which an organization's attempts at strategic communicative crisis management are being contested publicly by a variety of stakeholders. This situation offers organizational rhetoricians an interesting opportunity to explore how organizations use competing crisis communication strategies in an emergent crisis. To that end, this study decenters the source organization to engage the crisis communication rhetoric of three key organizations in the clergy sex abuse crisis. This approach allows the researcher to extend extant typologies of crisis communication strategies. Justification for this approach emerges from a review of the literature on crises and crisis communication.

CRISES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Crisis

A fairly representative conceptualization of organizational crises is offered by Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) who describe an organizational crisis as “a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals” (p. 233; in Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 7). According to Fink (1986), a crisis is marked by public scrutiny, high intensity, image-threats, and/or financial threats. According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003), a crisis “evokes a sense of threat, urgency, and destruction” (p. 4). Further, crises have ambiguous meanings and outcomes (Penrose, 2000; Sellnow & Seeger, 2001; Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997).

Embedded, however, in such conceptualizations of crises are several areas of persistent confusion which should be articulated. First, it is important to distinguish between *triggering events* and the *crisis process*. Extant literature argues that crises are brought about by a cosmology episode (Weick, 1985; Weick 1993) or a trigger event (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Unfortunately, by delimiting a crisis as an event (e.g., Fearn-Banks, 2001; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002), many scholars obscure the communicative co-construction of crises. In order to foreground this, one must engage the *crisis process*. Fink’s (1986) early conceptualization of a crisis as a “fluid, unstable, dynamic *situation*” (p. 20; emphasis added) is reinforced by newer understandings of crises as an inevitable, recurring element of the organizational lifecycle (Olaniran & Williams, 2001; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Further, despite the best attempts

of an organization to control a crisis situation rhetorically and materially, alternative accounts may emerge from the media, varying agendas may be offered by stakeholders, critical opinion may come from the public, particular responses may be mandated by legal and law enforcement entities, and confounding information may come to light through organizational members. In order to engage a processual understanding of crises, this paper explores how a source and two stakeholder organizations communicatively co-construct the clergy abuse crisis.

Second, it is important to distinguish between *crisis resolution* and *crisis management*. Although the term *crisis management* permeates the literature, it is consistently paired with an emphasis on the quick and efficient *resolution* of crises. The assumption that crises are natural and inevitable has yet to shift researchers' focus from resolution to management; the two are misnamed and conflated throughout the literature. For example, Seeger and Ulmer (2002) argue that most strategies in crisis communication typologies "focus largely on moving beyond the crisis" (p. 128). The preoccupation with crisis resolution indicates that the chief intent of organizations in crisis is a speedy return to status quo (i.e., organizational control). This speaks to resolution more than to management, despite the consistent use of the term *crisis management*. To disentangle the concepts of resolution and management, this paper augments a focus on the source organization's attempts to resolve the crisis with a focus on how stakeholder organizations alternately seek to extend or close out the crisis.

Third, it is important to take a more complex view of *proactive* versus *reactive* orientations to crisis management. Historically PR was construed as the public defense of organizational actions (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987). This defensive orientation has been

underscored by the extensive application of apologia, a defensive and thus reactive frame, for understanding crisis communication. Set against this backdrop, researchers have begun to explore the implications of proactive crisis management, with an emphasis on strategic crisis planning (Olaniran & Williams, 2001). In this school of thought, situation analyses, decision-making, prevention, and uncertainty-reduction are key (Olaniran & Williams, 2001). However, categorizing strategies as either proactive or reactive is insufficient. These orientations, as will be shown in the following analysis, must be further categorized as either offensive or defensive. (See Table 1.) For example, ‘stealing thunder’ is a proactive defensive strategy in which an individual releases potentially negative information about him or herself before anyone else can (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). On the other hand, kategoria-based apologia (Hearit, 1996) is a counter-attack (and thus reactive) strategy that comes from an offensive position. In response, this paper addresses four possible orientations to crisis communication.

Table 1
Extended Typology of Crisis Communication Orientations

	Reactive	Proactive
Defensive	Traditional apologia	Stealing thunder
Offensive	Kategoria-based apologia	Crisis planning

In sum, a review of the literature indicates that a more rigorous approach to crisis communication research must explore the communicative construction of a crisis, distinguish between the competing goals and differing processes of resolution and management, and allow for a more complex understanding of the strategic orientation organizations take to crises. This paper presumes that crises are comprised of one or more

trigger events embedded in a recursive cycle of planning and management, and that each communicative act in this cycle may take a variety of strategic orientations. Such a conceptualization builds on the substantive contributions of organizational communication research to PR, as reviewed below.

Crisis Communication

An essential contribution of organizational communication research to PR scholarship is challenging extant notions of communication. In particular, it replaces the notion of communication as a crisis management tool with the notion of communication as constitutive. That is, rather than focusing on a strategic set of practices, organizational communication researchers focus on the strategic management of meaning, as the following paragraphs illustrate.

Crisis Communication as Strategic Practice

Generally, public relations scholars present crisis communication as a strategic tool. During crises, effective communication (i.e., the fast delivery of accurate, relevant information) is recommended as an organization's top priority (Penrose, 2000). It is described as one of the main elements of crisis plans (Penrose, 2000), a mechanism for avoiding crises (Fink, 1986), and a way to minimize reputational damage (Fearn-Banks, 2001). As such, it is the strategic management of information flow used to protect an organization's image (Coombs, 1995; Marra, 1998; Penrose, 2000). In this view, communication is described as transmissional, with an emphasis on the dissemination, solicitation, and monitoring of information (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). Seeger and Ulmer (2002) concur, describing crisis communication as "practitioner-based

strategies for the management of a crisis including crisis planning, decision-making, and media relations” (p. 128).

Key to this strategic communication is speed (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Marra, 1998; Penrose, 2000; Williams & Olaniran, 1994). However, the practitioner mantra of ‘tell it all and tell it fast’ is complicated by issues of risk, timing, and control (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Risk emerges as practitioners manage the tension between stonewalling to mitigate legal ramifications and disclosing to mitigate image ramifications. Timing becomes an issue as media and the source organization grapple over the nature and flow of information. Control is another mitigating issue. When the source organization proactively discloses information, it gains control; however, it risks losing control if this disclosure escalates the import of the crisis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Despite these challenges, good crisis communication is repeatedly described as fast, efficient, and vigilant (Williams & Olaniran, 1994).

Although this approach to crisis communication is revealing, its preoccupation with strategic outcomes obscures the sense-making and persuasive functions of crisis communication. Organizational communication analyses, based largely on the tradition of rhetoric, add depth to strategic understandings of crisis communication.

Crisis Communication as Strategic Management of Meaning

Rhetoric, which addresses “the ways in which discourse functions in various social contexts” has been applied to the field of public relations since the early 1980s (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 172). Although based on the long tradition of individual rhetoric, corporate rhetoric is unique. Organizational rhetors face greater audience diversity, have access to more creative resources, and may be required to create an image

of univocality from polyvocality (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). It is also a key mechanism for the enactment of control and power in and by an organization.

Rhetorical analyses of crises foreground “the processes whereby organizations create and exchange meanings among stakeholders regarding the risk of crisis, cause, blame, responsibility, precautionary norms, and crisis-induced changes in the organization and its relationship to stakeholders” (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 128). Crisis rhetoric helps stakeholders make sense of the crisis situation and frame the future (Weick, 1988, in Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). It also serves as a means through which an organization can influence and/or control emerging interpretations of the crisis.

The tradition of organizational rhetoric has been brought to bear on crisis communication from at least four approaches: apologia theory, kategoria-based apologia, image restoration theory, and discourses of renewal. Each of these schools of thought builds on the others. The most developed and closest to the roots of classical rhetoric is that of apologia. Hearit (1994) describes apologia as a ‘discourse of defense’ in which one reframes organizational actions in a more compelling light (pp. 114-115). He describes apologia as serving three goals for a source organization. First, *persuasive accounts* “reassert terminological control over the interpretation of the act with a counter-interpretation of events” (p. 115). Redefinition through persuasive accounts may deny intent and thus responsibility. Second, *statements of regret* allow organizations to express sorrow while downplaying responsibility. This is important, since admitting concern for victims may negatively affect stock prices and denying responsibility may steady stock

prices (p. 117). Third, *dissociation* allows the organization to distance itself from the situation, thus appearing in a more favorable light (p. 121).

Three forms of dissociations are available to organizational rhetors. They may use *opinion/knowledge* dissociations when the facts are debatable; in this case, the organization argues that the accusations are opinions and offers ‘facts’ to counter them. This functions to deny responsibility or guilt. They may use *individual/group* dissociations when the facts of the case are not in question; in this case, the organization argues that the responsible party is or acted outside of the organization’s realm of authority. This functions to shift blame to another party. Finally, organizational rhetors may use *act/essence* dissociations when the organization must admit some guilt; in this case, the organization argues that the act was wrong, but is not representative of the character of the organization. This functions to deny intent.

On the heels of his (1994) terminological approach to apologia, Hearit (1996) proposes the notion of *kategoria*-based apologia. Since apologia is inherently defensive, Hearit proposes that organizations may respond to an attack with a counter attack. This essentially shifts an accused organization from the defensive (the situation of traditional apologia) to the offensive. There are three forms of *kategoria*. First, an organization may levy new charges, although this risks compounding its image of guilt by looking like a dodge. Second, an organization may challenge the validity of charges by reframing them (c.f., *opinion/knowledge* dissociations). Third, an organization may challenge the ethics of the accuser by labeling the charge as false or labeling the accuser as ethically suspect.

Although Hearit makes an important contribution to the literature by focusing on the shift of power between organizational rhetors, he gives several reasons why

kategoria-based apologia is a risky option for practitioners. Given the inherent power differentials among stakeholders in an organizational crisis, an organization can only use this strategy on an opponent of equal or larger power. Otherwise it will appear to be bullying its accuser. Additionally, the shift involved in kategoria may appear as an attempt to distract stakeholders from key issue(s). This strategy is best used when “the apologists can arguably claim the moral high ground, or at least claim that their opponents have taken the low road” (p. 245). This is an important contribution to the literature, since it requires at least a basic awareness of the communicative interplay among stakeholder organizations.

Benoit’s (1997) typology of image restoration strategies is the next development in crisis rhetoric. According to Benoit (1997), his focus on message options builds on, and is more exhaustive than, apologia theory. Essentially, he offers a typology of strategies organizations may use to restore their image. Organizations may deny the act with a simple denial or a shifting of blame. They may evade responsibility by claiming that they were provoked, alternative actions were not feasible, the situation was an accident, or they acted out of good intentions. Organizations in crisis may also work to reduce the offensiveness of the act by bolstering their image, minimizing the act, differentiating the act from more negative acts, pointing to some transcendent aspect of the context or outcome, attacking the accuser, or offering compensation to victims. Finally, they may take corrective action or offer an apology.

Although this approach clearly draws on Hearit’s earlier strategies of apologia, it reverts back to a single-rhetor view. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) critique image restoration theory as focusing on “linear rhetorical strategies designed to symbolically position the

organization more favorably” (p. 129). Further, it frames the concerns of stakeholders as “obstacles or costs to be quickly resolved, minimized and overcome.... The overriding goal is to return to a pre-crisis state as quickly and with as little damage to the organization’s image and reputation, cost and disruption as possible” (p. 129). This critique, emerging directly from the typology of strategies points to a consistent obscuring or devaluing of stakeholders and their concerns in the literature.

Although not speaking to this organizational bias, Seeger and Ulmer’s (2002) discourse of renewal is positioned as an alternative to both apologia and image restoration strategies. (Although though this approach is not strictly rhetorical, it situates the ‘discourse of renewal’ as an alternative to ‘discourses of apologia.’) Noting that “crisis-related discourse is most often about harm, responsibility, fault, culpability, blame, guilt, liability, compensation, and victimage” and generally framed as apologia, the authors propose an “optimistic discourse of rebuilding and renewal” (pp. 126-127). They site the expanding research on the positive consequences of crises as a rationale and context for this alternative conceptualization of crisis communication. Rather than focusing on strategy, Seeger and Ulmer explore how post-crisis discourse might frame crisis events as “more dynamic, natural, and potentially positive processes in organizing” (p. 129). This focus on discourse moves beyond traditional conceptualizations of rhetoric to focus on the “organic and interactive process of reformation and renewal” central to sense-making and planning (p. 130).

Importantly, this focuses a leader’s discourse on the future through use of ‘prospective sensemaking,’ thus freeing up “organizational resources that may have been constrained by a more myopic, retrospective focus” (p. 137). Here, crises are viewed as

opportunities for transformation and as natural components in the organizational lifecycle rather than as interruptions. In contrast to responses based on apology or image restoration, renewal responses are provisional rather than strategic. That is, leaders using a discourse of renewal draw on their instinctive reaction to a crisis rather than a pre-planned response. One important implication of this research is the specification of how (leaders') discourse can frame the construction (or enactment) of a crisis (Weick, 1979, 1988, 1995; in Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). A second key implication is the shift from a generic (i.e., typology-driven) to an organic (i.e., exigency-driven) view of crisis communication (Burns & Bruner, 2000, in Seeger & Ulmer, 2002).

Despite the substantive tradition of rhetorical approaches to crisis communication, the crisis communication literature continues to be biased toward generic, strategic approaches to crisis communication (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Interestingly, even the work of organizational rhetoricians can be criticized for its preoccupation with strategy. However, although this emphasis on "intention-based, strategy-centered" rhetoric has obscured issues of power, there has been a recent shift in research from linear analyses of particular cases to a "deep appreciation of the interactions of various institutional forces in contemporary (post)industrial society" (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, pp. 172-3). There is some debate in the literature as to the capacity of rhetorical analyses to address this institutional interactivity. While some scholars contend that rhetoric is not "*necessarily* unidirectional, strategic, and unrelated to truth" (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 173), Grunig uses the concept of rhetoric as a foil for his concept of two-way symmetrical PR. In addition, although Seeger & Ulmer's discourse of renewal is better suited for foregrounding the emergent, organic aspect of crisis communication than

traditional rhetorical approaches, its preoccupation with leaders' discourse obscures the polyvocality and interactivity inherent in crisis communication. What these analyses add to crisis research is an understanding of how source organizations use communication in a crisis. What they fail to add is an understanding of how communication is used to co-construct a crisis. To understand how the communication strategies and crisis rhetoric of multiple stakeholder organizations interact, this study traces how three organizations orient to crisis rhetoric in the clergy sex abuse crisis.

THE ORGANIZATIONS AND DATA

From a broad survey of media accounts of the clergy sex abuse crisis, three key organizations emerge as central: The United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), and the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). As the primary governing body of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, the USCCB may be seen as the Church's organizational representative in this crisis. Its goals include engaging and coordinating Catholic activities in the U.S.

(<http://www.usccb.org/whoweare.shtml>). It has clearly served as the voice of the American arm of the institutional Catholic Church, and has had high visibility in managing the crisis.

Both VOTF and SNAP were formed by (ex)Catholics in direct response to the phenomena of clergy abuse. VOTF's mission is to provide a voice through which the laity can share in church governance. The organization's goals include supporting victims, survivors, and priests of integrity and shaping structural change within the church (http://www.voiceofthefaithful.org/Who_We_Are/mission.html). Although it situates itself as a mechanism for bridging the laity and the hierarchy, church officials

contest VOTF's position as a Catholic organization. SNAP is a "volunteer self-help organization of survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their supporters" which works to educate its members and their communities in order to prevent clergy abuse (<http://www.snapnetwork.org/>). Its goals are healing and justice (<http://www.snapnetwork.org/>). Although members of SNAP may be (or have been) Catholic, the organization does not identify itself as Catholic.

This paper draws on the crisis-relevant press releases generated by the USCCB, VOTF, and SNAP from January 2002 (when the case broke publicly) through June 2005 (when data collection occurred). Not only was this format of crisis communication used consistently by each organization, but it was cached on each organization's website. In this format, the press releases were both publicly available and untouched by any intermediary organizations. For each organization, press releases were copied directly from the website, ordered chronologically, and saved in a single-spaced Word document. Relevant USCCB press releases comprised a 140-page document. Relevant VOTF press releases comprised a 234-page document. Relevant SNAP press releases/statements comprised a 401-page document.

THE ANALYSIS

The data analysis for this paper emerged as a variation on Linell's (1998) discourse analytic approach to dialogicality. Although it is impractical to apply a traditional micro-level discourse analysis to the current dataset, an adapted model extends current rhetorical understandings of crisis communication by illuminating the interactivity of organizations' crisis communication.

One aspect of dialogicality that Linell addresses is a comparative analysis of initiatives to responses. On one hand, looking for a direct initiative/response sequence is problematic when the communication flows along an asynchronous, virtual channel (i.e., the Internet), as it does in the current dataset. On the other hand, regardless of the channel that carries it, crisis communication emerges in response to real-time events. This being the case, there are points at which it is possible to determine whether a press release/statement is an initiative or response. In fact, given the nature of VOTF and SNAP as organizations that exist in response to the clergy abuse crisis, much of their communication is overtly responsive to the rhetoric and actions of the USCCB. Further, there may be strategic power in ‘punctuating’ the discourse in particular ways in order to shift the blame or craft a particular version of the crisis narrative.

Although it must be applied carefully to web-based PR due to its nature as asynchronous rather than temporally linear communication, an initiative/response analysis is especially apropos to crisis communication, given the tradition of conceptualizing crisis rhetoric as attack/defense sequences. Assumptions about initiative/response are implicit in any delineation of a press release/statement as either offensive or defensive. Thus, one way to adapt Linell’s initiative/response assessment to crisis communication is to compare initiative/response patterns to defensive/offensive orientations in the discourse. In doing this, the current study looks for ways in which each organization uses offensive-initiatives (i.e., being the first to levy an attack), offensive-responses (i.e., responding to another’s discourse with an attack), defensive-initiatives (i.e., using a preemptive defense), and defensive-responses (i.e., responding defensively to an attack). Defensive-responses (c.f., apologia) and offensive-initiatives (c.f., attack)

are perhaps more common than are offense-responses (c.f., *kategoria apologia*) and defensive-initiatives (c.f., *stealing thunder*). Each, however, appears in the current dataset, as the following paragraphs show.

USCCB

Even though it would make sense that the discourse of an organization in the defensive position would be marked by responses (given the responsive nature of a defense), this does not play out in the current case. In fact, the opposite is true. Here, the discourse of the ‘source’ organization, the USCCB, is comprised predominantly of what appear to be proactive initiatives. This is the case as it announces meetings, rolls out new policies, marks organizational changes, and narrates its managerial strategies. Although the USCCB’s crisis communication comes from an essentially defensive orientation in the overall crisis situation, its language is comprised of initiatives. Its discourse, then, is comprised of defensive-initiatives, marked by such words as *announced*, *resolved*, *named*, and *appointed*. Although these strategic actions are taken in response to the larger crisis situation, they are communicated in a proactive, declarative way. Typical examples follow.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) announced today that the convened membership of the conference ... approved a new Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. (USCCB, 2002, June 15)

Two hundred ten priest canon lawyers received training in the canonical procedures for implementing the Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), in conjunction with The Catholic University of America (CUA), provided the training. (USCCB, 2003, February 27)

Note the declarative tone in these quotes. It is as if the USCCB is rolling out a new policy and training its ‘priest canon lawyers’ of its own accord. The larger context of crisis slips

away in such language, the proactive tone almost outweighing the defensive stance of the organization. Similar language permeates the USCCB's press releases. The predominance of defensive-initiative discourse may be indicative of the hierarchy's power in the crisis. It clearly positions the USCCB as proactive and in control. Note that the USCCB focused one of its earliest press releases on "two decades of efforts by the nation's Catholic bishops to address the problem of sex abuse in the Church and to assist those who have been affected by it" (USCCB, 2002, February 15).

One of the few cases in which the USCCB's discourse is defensive-responsive comes in the face of a critique of a particular Vatican document. This 1962 document, unearthed in 2003, was criticized as implicating the hierarchy in a strategy of cover-up. The USCCB responded in the following way:

Crimen sollicitationis ... issued March 16, 1962, is being portrayed by some in and outside the media as a "smoking gun" allegedly proving that there was a "ground plan" for "covering up" the crime of sexual abuse of minors by clerics.

The essential point in response to those making this claim is that they are taking the document entirely out of context and therefore distorting it completely. ... To contend that the document is intended to create a "chilling effect" on reporting civil crimes is to attribute to it an intention it simply never had. ... To suggest that it was intended as a "ground plan" for handling these matters in the United States (or in any particular jurisdiction) is ludicrous. ...

The 1962 document is also being treated as evidence of the fact that the "Church knew there was a problem." As already indicated, both the 1917 and the 1983 Codes of Canon Law publicly recognized the sexual abuse of minors by clerics as a serious crime which is to be punished with a serious penalty. The gravity of such sexual abuse is based on the Decalogue. (USCCB, 2003, August 7)

Here, the defensive orientation of the hierarchy is underscored by its direct response to external (i.e., public) criticism. There are only a handful of press releases, though, in four years' time, that take a defensive-responsive tone. A more typical response is silence or

nonresponsiveness. This is called out specifically in the following SNAP press release about the lack of response received from a bishop.

Mahony did not respond to SNAP's letter.... SNAP is troubled by Mahony's silence and non-responsiveness to their request.

"Surely, the Cardinal can do SOMETHING.... We are convinced that he can find a way to help these men and other victims", says Manny Vega, SNAP Leader.

Leaders of SNAP are writing Mahony yet again, urging him to take a responsible role to stop the culture of intimidation in the church. (SNAP, 2004, December 22)

(Other evidence of their general nonresponsiveness comes from Governor

Keating's angry comments that they refused to cooperate with the NRB's request for the disclosure of information, bishops' refusal to open documents or publish the names of the accused, or frequent descriptions of the hierarchy as having a 'culture of secrecy.')

By consistently applying defensive-initiative language (and largely avoiding responsive language), the USCCB strategically downplays the crisis situation and frames its actions as positive and proactive.

VOTF

VOTF is situated in an interesting position in the crisis, being disassociated by the organization with which it identifies. Although in seeking to "shape structural change within the Church" (one of its organizational goals), VOTF orients itself as an offensive force in the crisis, VOTF's struggle to justify its existence in the Church's eyes puts VOTF on the defensive. This defensive orientation is clear in the following quote.

Voice of the Faithful is profoundly concerned by the recent bannings from church property.... It is our responsibility to point out that the very parishioners who have been erroneously labeled as "anti-Church and ultimately, anti-Catholic" are the same mainstream Catholics welcomed to Sunday morning Mass and encouraged to financially support the very properties from which they have been banned. ...

We must also remind our bishops that as an association of Catholic laity, Voice of the Faithful has formed properly under the meaning of Canon 215, which states, “The Christian faithful are at liberty freely to found and to govern associations for charitable and religious purposes or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world; they are free to hold meetings to pursue these purposes in common.” In addition, the teachings of Vatican II clearly articulate the right — and even the obligation — of laypersons to form associations and make their voices heard on matters concerning the good of the Church. (VOTF, 2002, October 11)

Clearly, VOTF is on the defensive here, using defensive-responsive language. This is typical of VOTF’s press releases about the bannings.

Although VOTF is on the defensive about its identity as a legitimate Catholic organization, it attempts to be an offensive force on other issues in the crisis (e.g., naming systemic complicity). Even its offensive discourse, however, is couched in responsive terms. By situating itself as responsive to the hierarchy, VOTF undermines the power of its offensive strategy. That is, in responding to the hierarchy’s actions so faithfully (albeit critically), VOTF marks itself as a follower. Its discourse is marked by passive, low power words like *call on*, *has learned*, and *seeks*. Its identity as “an organization . . . formed in response to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church” is underscored by its consistent use of responsive discourse (be that offensive or defensive), as the following quote shows.

Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) announced today that the Archdiocese of Boston Policies and procedures for the Protection of Children are welcome, if overdue. The long delay in issuing these policies is regrettable, but these provisions can move the Archdiocese of Boston in the right direction if they are implemented aggressively. . . .

Luise Dittrich, a VOTF co-founding member and spokesperson, commented on Bishop Lennon's letter, "If Bishop Lennon meant what he wrote about compassion, a pastoral response, and a commitment to reconciliation and healing, the Archdiocese will move immediately to settle the outstanding lawsuits with survivors, and will move to restore unity to the Archdiocese by ending the banning of Voice of the Faithful from Church property. These divisive, non-

pastoral stances continue to erode trust in the moral voice of this Archdiocese."
(VOTF, 2003, May 30)

This is just one example in which VOTF responds in a blow-by-blow fashion to the USCCB's actions. Throughout the crisis, VOTF adopts responsive discourse both to defend its identity and to critique the hierarchy. This deferential critique is in accord with VOTF's position as an internal dissent organization. Further, the reliance on responsive language for both offense and defense marks VOTF's submission to the hierarchy. Indeed, this may be one reason VOTF's discursive presence in the crisis plateaus in time.

SNAP

SNAP uses more initiatives in its discourse than VOTF does, and largely relies on an offensive orientation in its communication. Interestingly, where SNAP does respond, it often responds to incriminating behaviors of the hierarchy rather than to the hierarchy's discourse. The following quote gives an example of SNAP's offense-response to behaviors of the hierarchy.

The resignation of Bishop Dupre after allegations of abuse left a gaping hole in the Diocese of Springfield. The problems in Springfield reflect decades of mismanagement, cover up, protection of perpetrator priests and their criminal behavior, and possible destruction of diocesan documents. Let us not be naive in assuming that this could be rectified quickly by the right bishop. The problems in the diocese reflect the actions of its former leader, Bishop Thomas Dupre, but also his inner circle. The diocese was not the domain of one corrupt man, and cannot be "cleaned up quickly" by one honest man. (SNAP, 2004, March 9)

In this quote, SNAP leverages its response to Bishop Dupre's resignation as an opportunity to point out the corruption permeating the Springfield Diocese. This is clearly an offense-response based on the behavior rather than the PR or policies of the hierarchy.

In another example, SNAP turns its response to a cardinal's legal tactics into an attack on the hierarchy:

Several times, Maida has sought to have civil sex abuse lawsuits against Detroit area priests tossed out because of the statute of limitations. SNAP maintains that church officials should not "hide behind" a "restriction that encourages abusers and their supervisors to destroy evidence, intimidate witnesses and threaten victims."

"If you insist on fighting men who were raped and sodomized by an abusive priest, at least have the decency to fight fair, and not fight dirty," said Clohessy. "Fight on the merits, not on technicalities and loopholes like the archaic and dangerously restrictive statute of limitations." (SNAP, 2005, January 5)

This attack on a representative of the hierarchy clearly illustrates SNAP's strategic use of offense-responses. Where VOTF uses responses to defend itself against the hierarchy, SNAP uses responses to attack the hierarchy, at times pointing out discrepancies between the church's rhetoric and its actions.

Across time, SNAP levies an increasingly forceful stream of offense-initiatives on a multitude of issues (see Table 2). This approach accords with SNAP's identity as an activist organization, and exemplifies what one might think of as a typically offensive orientation. Initiating attacks against the source organization is a key function in any crisis. By naming a variety of issues, SNAP broadens the possible scope of the crisis. However, where these issues are not engaged by other stakeholders, they are effectively dead-ended. Thus, although the introduction of issues is potentially powerful, it is dependent on some response or engagement by other participants. In this case, many of the offense-initiatives SNAP presents are not addressed (at least in this venue) by the other organizations.

Table 2
Sampling of SNAP's Offensive-Initiatives

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- Discloses names of ten Northern California abusers to be named in lawsuits.
 - Comments on the possible 'fraudulent transfer of assets' in the Diocese of Baker, OR.
 - Accuses McChesney (head of OCYP) as lacking understanding of hierarchy's 'game.'
 - Leaflets a perpetrator's neighborhood in St. Louis.
 - Traces the possible transfer of Nevada priest to MO treatment center.
 - Comments on incriminating 1962 Vatican document.
 - Encourages Catholics to bypass bishops' annual appeals.
 - Demands apologies and restorative action from complicit leaders.
 - Exposes abuse cover-up (i.e., 40 cases in which archbishop knew of prior crimes).
 - Urges Bishop of Maine not to interfere with pending (small claims) trial.
 - Urges NY bishop to investigate abuser living in upstate NY.
 - Asks Albany's bishop to investigate abuser living/working locally.
 - Asks Cardinal to 'rein in' parishioners showing support in court for accused CA priest.
 - Asks judge to more strongly enforce probation for convicted OH priest.
 - Urges victims/survivors not to join in Archdiocese of Cincinnati's compensation fund.
 - Notes bishops found in contempt of court for refusing to turn over documents.
 - Calls for bishop accountability; criticize 'fraternal correction.'
 - Names abusers who live in/work around Vatican.
 - Calls on church leaders to disclose names of molesters.
 - Traces abusers working/living in San Francisco Archdiocese.
-

What emerges from this analysis is a more complex understanding of how stakeholders orient to crisis communication. Rather than simply being on the offense or defense, they are better described by comparing their offensive/defensive orientations to the balance of initiatives/responses in their discourse. Although each organization uses both initiatives and responses, and may alternate from offense to defense as the crisis unfolds, each seems to exhibit one orientation more than the others. As the preceding paragraphs and quotes indicate, the USCCB seems to favor defensive-initiatives, VOTF to use offensive-responses on crisis issues and defensive-responses on identity, and SNAP to alternate between offensive-initiatives and offensive-responses. (See Table 3.)

Table 3
Discursive Orientations to Crisis Communication

	Initiative	Response
Offensive	SNAP	VOTF & SNAP
Defensive	USCCB	VOTF

These paradoxical discursive orientations have interesting implications for crisis management in the current case. The USCCB offsets the vulnerability of its defensive position with a masterful, proactive tone. VOTF, on the other hand, attempts to counterbalance its responsive (and thus weak) identity with offensive discourse. SNAP shares this offensive-responsive strategy with VOTF, but augments it with a more powerful offensive-initiative discourse. Whereas the offensive-responsive approach does little for VOTF or SNAP, the offensive-initiative approach to PR advances SNAP's issue management goals. When viewed from a dialogical perspective, these discursive orientations reveal how each organization's PR affects the unfolding crisis. To begin with, the USCCB's lack of responsive language (at least in this venue) dead-ends discourse. Then, VOTF's failure to initiate restricts its influence on how the crisis unfolds. Finally, SNAP's alternating use of initiatives and responses positions it as having the greatest potential dialogically (although this is stymied by the USCCB's non-responsiveness).

This approach to understanding crisis communication extends the traditional dichotomy between offensive and defensive orientations to a crisis. It shows the strategic power of offense-responses. It also raises the potential that defense-responses may give an organization more credibility than reliance on defense-initiatives does. This has

important implications for the communicative construction of any crisis, indicating both potential challenges and strategies in crisis communication.

CONCLUSION

The focus in this paper has been on extending current understandings of the communicative construction of crises. By adapting Linell's focus on the balance between initiatives and responses to crisis communication, this study has extended traditional understandings of the offensive and defensive orientation to crisis communication. What emerged is a hybrid typology of crisis communication orientations, including offensive-initiatives (i.e., being the first to levy an attack), offensive-responses (i.e., responding to another's discourse with an attack), defensive-initiatives (i.e., using a preemptive defense), and defensive-responses (i.e., responding defensively to an attack).

When applied to the clergy sex abuse crisis, this typology reveals ways in which each organization either offsets or compounds any weakness in its rhetorical position. In particular, the USCCB offsets the weakness inherent in its defensive position by leveraging initiatives. VOTF less successfully attempts to offset the weakness inherent in its responsive orientation by engaging offensive discourse. In addition to sharing this strategy, SNAP employs what might be deemed the typical rhetorical strategy of attack: offensive-initiative discourse. This approach allows SNAP to advance its agenda for crisis-related issues.

It is important to note that the focus on how multiple stakeholder organizations treat the potential for interactivity is relevant to crisis situations well beyond the clergy abuse crisis. Indeed, it is relevant to any organization interested in adapting its crisis management to the responses of key stakeholders. It could also be extended to indicate

reasons organizational crises become intractable or evolve in particular ways. As public relations researchers broaden their focus beyond managerial strategies to larger situational variables (e.g., the presence of alternate voices and discourses), and as they continue the trend to explore co-creational theories of PR, such approaches are essential.

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