

USING THE SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY (SCCT) IN TECHNICAL AND HUMAN BREAKDOWN ACCIDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

In a crisis, organizational reputation is seriously threatened by negative stakeholder perceptions which usually produce damage far larger than that created by the crisis event itself, as in the case of human error accidents, when stakeholders attribute great responsibility to the organizations involved and the management must adopt a suitable communication strategy in order to prevent/minimize reputational damage. Coombs's SCCT provides managers assets to determine the type of crisis and the proper communicational approach to protect organizational reputation.

Design/methodology/approach: A technical error accident has been approached from a SCCT perspective. The case, included among other two, has been presented in a survey. After reading about the three accidents, respondents answered a number of questions designed to determine the amount of their anger on every case and how it influences their perception on crisis responsibility.

Findings: Stakeholders anger against those considered as responsible for a crisis often represents an aggravating factor to which managers must pay attention while planning for specific types of crises. Anger is considerably influenced by the presence of victims as well as by their condition in such a measure that, when stakeholders find out about these elements, they may go a step further in their approach to a crisis, thus attributing increased responsibility to those considered as blamable.

Originality/value: The conclusions of the study are valuable for managers trying to draw communication strategies in the pre-crisis stage, because they reveal the link between stakeholder anger and perceptions over organizational accountability/responsibility.

Keywords: crisis communication, crisis responsibility, organizational reputation, SCCT, human error.

1. Literature review: theoretical aspects

Crisis communication cannot be approached just from a general point of view, as a matter of principle, without addressing the context, the particular phenomena which have generated the crisis, the events and actors directly influencing crisis advancement, the crisis history in a particular organization, organization's position and behavior during past and present crisis events. These elements involving both organizational actors and stakeholders produce important consequences on how to frame a crisis event within a certain crisis type, how to approach the crisis communication content, how to design communication strategies and key messages.

1.1. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT – initially presented by W. Timothy Coombs by 1995), which will be approached below, is intended to investigate and resolve such issues.

From the perspective of the authors W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay, SCCT develops a prescriptive system projected to harmonize crisis response strategies with crisis situations. They take the harmonization of crisis response strategies with the actual crisis situation as a strategic manner of crisis communication. In such case, SCCT is meant to categorize crisis types so that they can be integrated with crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007c). Labeling the types of crises based on their level of reputational damage and of organizational achievements (past actions, behavior, conduct, stakeholder relations) allows to predict the level of responsibility stakeholders would associate with a crisis. In this case, the attributed responsibility can be taken as a key indicator of the potential reputational damage, as stakeholders would expect that organization do more for victims when it is perceived as more responsible the situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Coombs insists on the logical link between the attribution theory and crisis management, link realized through the SCCT, which applies the basic ideas of the attribution theory on a large scale of crises: the attribution theory is based on the premise that, interacting with organizations, people attribute responsibility for negative and unexpected events; or, crises represent such events, both negative and unexpected (Coombs, 2007c), and organizational stakeholders will not only have a certain perception on the organization considered as accountable, but they will even design their own behavior in accordance to these perceptions. Considering that stakeholders will evaluate and estimate the crisis responsibility of an organization based on their attributions of the cause of that crisis, Coombs makes clear the importance of a crisis communication approach keeping into account not only every specific crisis situation the organization went through in its whole existence, but its conduct and behavior in those situations as well. Consequently, SCCT “advances and tests hypotheses related to how perceptions of the crisis situation affect the crisis response and the effects of crisis responses on outcomes such as reputation, emotions, and purchase intention” (Coombs, 2007a, p.137).

SCCT is an important tool addressed first to crisis managers who analyze a crisis situation and, based upon the analysis conclusions, estimate the level of reputational threat of the crisis, actually assessing the intensity of damage that the crisis could produce to the organizational reputation if measures are not being taken. Crisis managers must identify the factors shaping the threats to reputation (initial responsibility for the crisis, crisis history, and the relationship history-past reputation) and use them in order to estimate these threats as accurately as possible.

1.2. Coombs suggests crisis managers to follow a two-step process in their estimation on reputational threats of a crisis. *The first step* consists in determining to whom the crisis responsibility is initially attributed, identifying in what measure the organizational actors think that organization’s doings have caused the crisis, in accordance to their answer to a question such as: has the event been sabotage or a personal negligence? (Coombs, 2007a). In line with the answer they give, every crisis type generates specific and predictable levels of responsibility, thus being identified three clusters (categories of responsibility) for every crisis type: the “victim” cluster, with weak attributions of crisis responsibility (natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering, rumors); the “accidental” cluster, with attributions of a minimal responsibility for the situation, the event being taken as fortuitous and uncontrollable by the organization (challenges, mega-damage, accidents caused by technical breakdown,

recalls caused by technical breakdown); the “preventable” cluster, with high attributions of responsibility, the crisis event being presumably intentional and possibly preventable (human breakdown accident, human breakdown recall, organizational misconduct without/with injuries) (Coombs, 2007a).

As to whether accepting or not organizational responsibility, scholar opinions have been divided, keeping into account the fact that such approach could cause important legal, financial and reputational consequences (Pace, Fediuk & Botero, 2010). In our opinion, the organization must assume responsibility when it exists and communicate its decision using the most adequate crisis response strategies, because otherwise not assuming responsibility may generate long term risks for the organization.

The second step in assessing the threats involves two factors with vital consequences in the evolution of the crisis event and of organization’s relationship with its stakeholders: consistency and distinctiveness. *Consistency* reveals the crisis history, the likelihood that the organization could have faced similar events in its past, thus suggesting that it has constantly had problems. *Distinctiveness* reflects the relation between history and previous reputation, how adequately the organization dealt with its stakeholders in similar contexts. According to SCCT, as to these two factors, “each indicates that the crisis is part of a pattern of behaviors rather than an isolated incident” (Coombs, 2007a, p. 137).

High consistency and low distinctiveness are defined by Coombs as intensifying factors of a crisis event as to the attribution of responsibility, which eventually results in an increased risk of negative consequences over the current organizational reputation. In this case, the crisis response strategies should vary in accordance with the perception of crisis responsibility acceptance: as the negative effects towards reputation amplify, the use of crisis response strategies adequate to the responsibility level required by the crisis event becomes mandatory. Thus, managers must accept higher degrees of responsibility as long as reputational threats intensify (Coombs, 2007a; Jin & Cameron, 2007).

Finally, we have to say that SCCT, as a prospective theory trying rather to explore new crisis communication opportunities than to put good use of expertise coming out from case studies, offers managers a very useful tool set which can be successfully utilized in planning for crisis management. However, SCCT is not exhaustive; it can be applied as such, as well as in conjunction with other theories, like the image restoration theory proposed by W. L. Benoit since 1995 (Weber, Erickson & Stone, 2011).

2. SCCT – methodological aspects of crisis response planning

At a first sight, one can make a false assumption that the use of SCCT in crisis management does not take into account too much care of stakeholders. Indeed, focused on the concept of organizational reputation, the organizational behavior based on this theory may seem as selfish, paying exclusive attention to the organizational wellness and to how others perceive the organization, with no (or not much) concern of the expectancies and worries of stakeholders.

As a matter of fact, the authors start from the premise that crisis management is essentially based on providing safety and security to stakeholders. Similarly, crisis communication also has the role to protect both stakeholders and the organization (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay & Johansen, 2010).

Accordingly, they emphasize the idea that, in crisis situations, the concern of an organization for its own reputation comes just on the second place: first, the organization will have to provide protection to the actual and potential victims against possible damage they may go through; secondly, the organization must protect itself against potential collateral damage as, for instance, financial and reputational ones (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Therefore, whenever needed, the organization will primarily make sure that it has delivered to its stakeholders *instructions* (information and advice on how they can physically protect themselves from effects produced by the crisis) and *adjusting information* (counseling meant to help stakeholders to psychologically adapt themselves to cope with the crisis and also meant to show that the organization cares for them); if needed, this kinds of information can come together with *corrective actions*. Only after this primary obligation to stakeholders has been fulfilled, the organization may approach measures to manage its own reputation.

From a methodological perspective, one can approach the crisis management of an organization being aware of several variables and elements provided by Coombs and Holladay (2002), such as responsibility attributed for the crisis, organizational reputation, personal control, crisis types, crisis response strategies, stakeholder emotions, crisis severity, performance history, as well as correlations among all of them.

2.1. The process of managing crises based on SCCT should begin with the right definition of the crisis type to be managed. In order to determine the types of crises and consequently the way the organization will answer them, in accordance with the responsibility attributed by stakeholders for a crisis situation, the above-mentioned authors have utilized a number of scales meant to measure reputation, personal control, and crisis responsibility.

2.2. Based on how much responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organization for a crisis event, the authors then have identified 13 crisis types: rumors; natural disasters; malevolence/product tampering; workplace violence; challenges; technical breakdown accidents; technical breakdown product recall; megadamage; human breakdown accident; human breakdown product recall; organizational misdeeds with no injuries; organizational misdeed management conduct; organizational misdeeds with injuries.

2.3. Going from the first crisis type to the last, one can observe the increase of the accountability attributed to the organization confronted with such an event. Therefore, the 13 types can be ordered in three larger clusters as follows:

- the “victim cluster” (rumors; natural disasters; malevolence/product tampering; workplace violence), consisting in events which induce the victimization of the organization involved. Therefore these events produce a *minimal attribution* of crisis responsibility;
- the “accidental cluster” (challenges; technical breakdown accidents; technical breakdown product recall; mega-damage): the events in this category are perceived as unintentional and produce a *moderate attribution* of crisis responsibility;
- the “preventable cluster” (human breakdown accident; human breakdown product recall; organizational misdeeds with no injuries; organizational misdeed management conduct; organizational misdeeds with injuries) refers to events which could have been avoided through a proper organizational conduct, therefore they produce a *strong attribution* of crisis responsibility.

This increase of responsibility attribution is caused by the more intense emotions and feelings of the stakeholders as they perceive either a potential or an existing threat resulting from a given crisis situation: the higher the perception of a threat, the worse stakeholder emotions. Such perceptions are eventually able to affect “how crisis can be communicated, managed, and survived by organizations” (Jin & Cameron, 2007, p. 256).

More than that, the presence of victims influences the attributions of responsibility in terms of *severity*, defined as being “the amount of damage generated by a crisis including financial, human, and environmental damage” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 169); going further, the way how stakeholders perceive the performance of the organizational leadership during the crisis event is supposed to aggravate more the level of responsibility attributed to the organization (Hwang & Cameron, 2007).

As a consequence, we have chosen a case which, as described below, if leaving aside stakeholder emotions, might be considered as a technical breakdown accident belonging to the second cluster described above; however, because of the strong perception of a threat, generated by the presence of victims, people – particularly the external organizational publics – tend to strongly attribute crisis responsibility to the organization(s) involved, thus placing it (them) in the next, the most inconvenient cluster.

2.4. The attribution theory – epistemological fundament of the SCCT – states that sympathy and anger are the essential emotions of people who perceive a situation and tend to attribute causes to it, as well as to loc for responsibility for causes (Coombs, 2007d). In this respect, SCCT investigates the connection between emotions and crises, revealing that there is an obvious correlation between attribution of responsibility and stakeholder anger (Coombs *et al.*, 2010).

Consequently, every crisis situation an organization must confront will produce, beside other effects, the emergence of certain emotions among stakeholders perceiving the crisis. These emotions cover a large scale, going from sympathy (in cases in which the organization is perceived as the victim of the crisis event) to displeasure, worry, sorrow, irritation, resentments, annoyance, anger and even fury (in the degree in which stakeholders attribute the crisis responsibility to the organization) (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

3. Case study

In the crisis case chosen to be analyzed, we intend to examine certain aspects on how stakeholder perceptions generate emotions often resulting in behaviors. In crisis situations, as we have already mentioned above, stakeholders may perceive the organization facing a crisis with various degrees of either sympathy or anger. The different stages of anger, corresponding to the measure in which the organization is perceived as accountable for the crisis event, represent an aggravating element, since these emotions, once objectified, generate behaviors. Sometimes these behaviors consist in communication acts belonging to stakeholders, who make their opinions and discontents known to either each other or additional publics; today more than ever, given the presence of social networks, the spread of such comments is significantly easier and more dangerous; it is what the SCCT authors call *negative communication dynamic* (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

Besides, since in most cases organizational crises have a conflictual aspect, they consequently have an increased potential of generating negative emotions. Therefore managers

– particularly those in the business field – must realize the probability of the evolution of diverse degrees of anger as a consequence of the perceptions generated in stakeholders' mind as a result of conflicting situations. These forms of anger must be addressed by utilizing receiver-oriented crisis response strategies, not sender-oriented, that is strategies focused on stakeholder concerns, not on defending organizational reputation (Coombs *et al.*, 2010).

3.1. *The crisis situation described:* in the afternoon of August 16th, 2010, a fire burst out in the intensive care facility of the Maternity Giulești (Bucharest, Romania), followed by several blasts produced by the overheated medical equipment. According to a first press statement of the spokesperson representing the Emergency Situations Inspectorate (ISU) of Bucharest, nobody was hurt. Fire rescue teams belonging to the above-cited Inspectorate, ambulance crews from the Emergency Mobile Service Bucharest (SMURD), as well as police and gendarme squads came immediately on place. Because of the fire, 60 women and 53 children were evacuated from the hospital up to its liquidation.

Very soon, media reports from the site revealed that the fire actually had come out in a room in which 11 prematurely-newborn babies, connected to the medical equipment and presumed to be kept under strict care. Three babies died in fire, while the other eight were urgently transferred, by the SMURD crews, at the children's hospital „Grigore Alexandrescu” (Bucharest). Other three from those remaining passed away in the next days because of the injuries suffered in the fire; two of the survivors, twins, left the hospital in good condition after 30 days of medical care.

The prosecutor investigating the case said that the fire had been caused by a short circuit provoked by an improvisation in the electrical system of the facility. Produced behind a wood locker, the short circuit caused its hidden burning until the flame reached the artificial breathing equipment with oxygen cylinders, the fire becoming this way explosive.

The spread of the fire was favored by the fact that, for several tens of minutes, the facility with the newborn babies had been locked unsurveilled. Later, the nurse on duty in that facility at the moment of fire affirmed that she was the only one taking care of babies, as a result of the lack of medical personnel because of their leave to work abroad, and that she had to leave the room for 12 minutes. The room was supposed to be permanently locked and could be accessed by magnetic card, but every employee of the maternity had such access cards.

The fire was put out by the firefighters from the ISU of Bucharest. Right after that, the maternity's management was fired, the Healthcare minister took a press conference, and Romania's President said: “I do regret the disaster from the maternity Giulești very much”. Since the fire was produced on August, a month usually described as scarce in hard news, it generated huge media coverage, which stood at a high level for weeks.

Moreover, many reports were released in the international media as well (BBC News, CNN International, ABC News, Daily Express, The Telegraph, etc.). In the context of those reports, mentions were made about the poor condition of the Romanian healthcare system: “Romania is one of the European Union's poorest countries and its medical services are considered among the worst in the bloc. Safety and hygiene standards remain little changed since communist times at many of its medical facilities” (*The Telegraph*); “Romania's healthcare system is often regarded as one of the worst in the European Union” (*BBC News*).

The media coverage abounded in emotional details: the prosecutor's statement that, as the babies were still in the room on fire, the ambient temperature went up to 200 Celsius

degrees – temperature quickly associated by journalists with that existing in a oven while cooking; statements coming from the parents of babies killed or hospitalized; the evolution of the premature twins injured in fire; the fact that the room was for a while unwatched and locked. This approach was otherwise unsurprising, and it resulted in public anger reaching high levels that way.

In our opinion, the case is relevant to find out how stakeholder anger comes up and intensifies during a crisis situation in which victims are present and to what extent emotions related to victims may influence the evolution of the crisis event and consequently the organizational crisis response. As a matter of fact, in one of our hypotheses described below we have assumed that the presence of victims increases stakeholder negative emotions. The relevance of the case comes from both the number and the condition of victims (prematurely-born babies still unable to survive without intensive medical care); this is why our survey referred to three victim cases presented together, in which the number and the condition of victims were different.

3.2. Therefore, *the goal* of our research consists in explaining how stakeholder anger can aggravate both crisis situations and the condition of organizations confronting them.

3.3. In order to achieve this goal, we have formulated three *hypotheses*:

H 1. If there are human victims in a crisis situation, then stakeholder anger is more visible than in situations without victims.

The empiric observation reveals that such correlation exists, at list in journalists' case: „the media love victims. [...] Reporters and editors also consider it one of their Missions From God to make things right. To bring justice in a world full of injustice” (Jones, 1996, p. 50). Consequently, media reports favorable to victims produce sympathy for those among stakeholders as well; our research has been meant to either confirm or infirm this assumption.

H 2. The more stakeholder sympathy towards victims grows, the more their anger against those perceived as responsible.

In most cases, stakeholders get their information about a crisis in a mediated way, which is through media. Or, media reports in situations resulting in victims observe a quite simplistic scheme “victim-guilty”, in which the presence of victims is necessarily accompanied by the existence of someone(s) culpable. Following the scheme “victim-guilty” enforced by media, stakeholders are inclined to attribute more responsibility when the victim situation produces more sympathy.

H 3. The more stakeholder sympathy towards victims grows, the more their availability to act against those perceived as responsible.

Emotions generated by certain stakeholder perceptions not only create opinions and attitudes concerning the actors involved, but can also generate behaviors towards them. In crisis situations, stakeholder angry can produce – and often it does produce – facts of hostility against the organization dealing with the crisis and taken as responsible: increased activism, boycott of its products, street actions, attacks to certain facilities. Moreover, these behaviors can even hint at those having no connection with the crisis situation, but only with the blamed organization: providers, retailers, shareholders, supporters, and partisans.

3.4. *Method:* three cases have been selected, all of them consisting in accidents with human victims: a traffic accident with four injured (occurred near Ploiești on January, 2012), a gas explosion in a mine in Uricani, in which five miners were killed (February, 2011), and the

above-described fire from the maternity Giulești, when six babies prematurely born were killed (August, 2010); the traffic accident and the explosion in mine have been chosen as witness-cases, in order to allow – to the extent to which it exists – the making of a distinction as to the correlations between the presence of victims (their number and condition) and the degree of stakeholder anger. The cases have been chosen so that they were distant enough in time from the moment of applying the set of questions, in order to avoid emotions produced by recent media reports. Following the same manner, the descriptions of the cases have been intentionally concise and neutral, with the purpose of reducing at a minimum their emotional impact. The three situations have been coded using the name of the place they occurred: *Uricani* (explosion in mine), *Giulești* (maternity fire), and *Ploiești* (traffic accident); both the situations and actors involved have been placed in the question contents in random order.

The interrogation has consisted in a survey, by applying a set of questions meant to make clear the hypotheses above-mentioned. The set of questions, simultaneously and identically presented on hardcopy to 83 respondents and accessed online by 70 more other respondents, has been applied between February 25 and March 8, 2012. The demographic data of the sample questioned are as follows:

- age: 81.4% between 18 and 25 years; 11.76% between 26 and 35 years; 5.23% between 36 and 45 years; 1.96% between 46 and 60 years;
- gender: 11.11% male respondents; 88.89% female respondents;
- education: 61.44% college students; 9.15% college graduate; 16.99% master students; 13.72 % MBA; 0.65% doctors; 0.65% other.

By addressing the set of questions both online and offline, we have tried to reach a number of respondents as large as possible, as well as to get a sample closer to Romanian social reality. However, although the number of respondents was quite satisfying (a total amount of 153 respondents), limitations have been unavoidable: the offline test has been applied exclusively to college students; the online set of questions could be accessed randomly by anybody willing to respond, with rather poor control over sample composition.

The set of questions had an initial control question, with mandatory answer required before going further to the other issues: “If you should rescue from drowning only one of the people listed below, which one you would choose?” It has been meant to determine the measure in which the victim condition (age, in our case) may influence the perception of a situation. From the total of 153 respondents, 35.95% showed themselves ready to rescue a child of not much than one year old, 56.87% chose to rescue a child between two and 13 years, and the remaining made other choices which we considered as being negligible.

After answering that first question, respondents read the descriptions of the three situations with victims, like they were explained above. A number of questions followed, with a Likert scale having five options (from definitely unfavorable to definitely favorable), intended to reveal the intensity with which respondents (a) show sympathy towards victims, (b) show sympathy/antipathy towards various actors involved in those three situations, (c) are available to follow a certain conduct as a result of emotions generated by the above-described situations (actional availability); respondents have also been asked to make clear their position towards the three types of issues just mentioned above in the hypothetical case that there were no victims.

Finally, the questions referring to the organizational actors have been doubled by reverse questions in both alternatives (the presence or absence of victims): “How appropriately do you

think the actors involved in the above-described situations behaved?” in parallel with “How responsible for the occurrence of the above-described situations do you think the actors involved are?”

3.5. *Discussion:* the hypotheses 1 and 3 have been confirmed, whereas the hypothesis 2 has been confirmed just partially.

From the administration of the survey and the interpretation of the answers given, another result has also come out as to the age of victims: particularly when it is placed in certain special conditions, the age influences stakeholder angry in a great measure; in our case study, the fact that the victims were prematurely-newborn babies made that respondents' sympathy towards victims, respectively their anger against those taken as responsible, be more increased than, for example, in the case of the five miners killed in the mine Uricani.

This finding drives to the conclusion that the presence of victims and their special conditions turns in aggravating factors of crisis situations, because the stakeholder perception over the event is influenced in the direction of worsening the attributed responsibility. Therefore, when it comes to technical breakdown accidents (the case of Giulești), the presence of victims determines the stakeholders to make a step forward in their crisis evaluation and consider it as a human breakdown accident, to which they associate a more increased degree of attributed responsibility.

The anger felt by stakeholders accordingly to the victims' condition influences directly their availability as to the adoption of a certain behavior. Indeed, if in the case of the traffic accident just 1.31% of respondents declared themselves as “definitely” available to take part in a street protest, in the case of the children from the maternity Giulești their percentage raised up to 28.1%, whereas the respondents who would have participated in such a protest “in a certain measure”, “in a great measure” and “definitely yes” went up to 77.12%.

A further research direction which ought to be approached would consist in how other actors involved in crisis situations are perceived: although they are not taken as directly responsible, different degrees of guilt are attributed to some of them. More than that, when stakeholders have certain expectations from a crisis actor presumed as having to prove high professionalism and competence in the resolution of certain crisis aspects, there is a risk that people attribute more responsibility to that particular actor and, consequently, more guilt, even if that guilt does not technically exist; the doctors from the hospital Grigore Alexandrescu may be taken as such an example: although they had no guilt in the fire in the maternity Giulești and in spite of the fact that they made all the professional efforts in order to rescue the children injured in fire, 20.26% from respondents considered them as being “guilty in a certain measure”, “guilty in a great measure” and “definitely guilty”. This is why we find usefully to try in the future to approach the reasons and mechanisms through which stakeholders attribute responsibility to those actors.

3.6. *Results.* In the beginning, respondents have been asked to indicate the intensity of their feelings related to those three situations as they had been described. Their answers have predominantly favored the situation resulted from the fire in maternity, as showed in the Table 1.

Table 1. *The emotional impact produced by the overall perception of the situation (%)*

	Not at all	Little	In a certain measure	Much	Very much
Giulești			8.5	22.22	68.62
Uricani	0.65	6.53	29.41	49.67	12.42
Ploiești	0.11	30.72	43.14	10.46	2.61

The first hypothesis that we had crafted referred to the correlation between the presence of victims and the stakeholder anger. Therefore, we have first tested the intensity of respondent sympathy towards those perceived as suffering, both in the above-described real situations in which victims had resulted (V+) and in hypothetic alternatives in which there have been no victims (V-). Table 2 shows that stakeholder closeness towards those suffering diminishes when there are no victims, especially in the first two cases (column 11 vs. column 10; 9 vs. 8; 7 vs. 6); in parallel, the indifference increases (column 5 vs. column 4; 3 vs. 2).

Table 2. *The intensity of sympathy towards those considered as suffering (%)*

	Not at all		Little		In a certain amount		Close		Very close	
	V+	V-	V+	V-	V+	V-	V+	V-	V+	V-
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Children from maternity Giulești	5.23	6.53	5.88	11.76	19.61	16.99	33.99	30.72	35.29	33.33
Miners from Uricani	13.07	15.68	20.91	26.80	45.75	39.22	17.65	16.99	2.61	1.31
Wounded from Ploiești	24.84	31.37	28.10	27.45	33.99	28.76	9.80	9.80	1.96	2.61

This closeness to victims influences, as already stated, the intensity of the guilt perception in the case of the actors considered as being responsible. First, Table 3 reveals that, for the three situations tested, the stakeholders attribute responsibility as follows: to the management of the maternity, but also subsidiary to the nurse, in the case Giulești; to the management of mine, in the case Uricani; to one of the drivers, in the case Ploiești. On the other hand, the same table reveals first the fact that, in the absence of victims, stakeholders have a tendency (it is true that in a relatively reduced measure) to absolve of guilt those taken as responsible (column 3 vs. column 2); then, if the situation is fluctuating as to the attribution of moderate degrees of guilt (columns 4-7), stakeholder clemency is obvious when the intensity of attributed guilt is increased (columns 8-11). Finally, an interesting observation refers to the other actors: although some of them do not belong to the organizations taken as responsible, and although their mission has consisted in interventions to solving potentially dangerous situations (firefighters, ambulance, rescuers, police), stakeholders tend to attribute them different degrees of guilt, especially when victims exist.

Table 3. *The intensity of attribution of guilt to those considered as responsible (%)*

	Not guilty		Guilty in a reduced measure		Guilty in a certain measure		Guilty in a great measure		Definitely guilty	
	V+	V-	V+	V-	V+	V-	V+	V-	V+	V-
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Firefighters from ISU Bucharest	90.85	91.50	9.15	5.23	5.88	0.65		1.31		
The driver of Audi Q7	1.96	3.27	8.50	7.84	9.80	13.73	43.14	41.18	43.79	32.68
The management of maternity Giulești	0.65	1.31	10.46	6.54	7.84	22.22	52.29	43.14	35.29	25.49
The ambulance service Ploiești	92.81	92.81	5.23	3.27	1.96	1.31	1.31	0.65		0.65
Rescuers from Uricani	92.81	92.16	5.23	4.58	3.92	0.65	1.31			1.31
Crews of SMURD Bucharest	94.12	94.12	4.58	1.96	1.96	1.31			0.65	0.65
The traffic police Ploiești	59.48	61.44	32.68	25.49	20.91	7.84	3.92	3.27		
The nurse from Giulești	1.96	3.92	20.91	10.46	20.26	20.26	36.60	36.60	33.99	27.45
The management of the mine Uricani	7.19	10.46	25.49	16.99	24.18	17.65	39.87	38.56	17.65	13.07
Medical doctors from the hospital Grigore Alexandrescu	70.59	77.12	13.07	6.54	10.46	7.84	8.50	5.23	3.92	1.96
The driver of Skoda	28.76	32.68	45.10	32.68	28.10	21.57	16.99	8.50	2.61	2.61

The second hypothesis of our research referred to the presence of a direct correlation between stakeholder sympathy towards victims and their anger against those considered as responsible. The compared analysis of the Tables 2 and 3 reveals the existence of a correlation in the case Giulești, especially if one considers the scores obtained by both actors taken as responsible (the management of maternity and the nurse). Instead, the anger of respondents against one of the drivers involved in the traffic accident from Ploiești is larger than in the case of the management of the mine Uricani; in our opinion, this outcome comes as a consequence of how stakeholders perceive the causes: in the case of the traffic accident, stakeholders are inclined to attribute causes preponderantly human and, consequently, more responsibility, whereas, in the case of the explosion in mine, they mainly take into account the technical causes, thus reducing the level of attribution of responsibility.

Lastly, the third hypothesis questions the presence of a direct correlation between stakeholder sympathy towards victims and their availability for actions directed against those considered as responsible. Comparing the Tables 2 and 4, one can detect the direct influence of the sympathy towards victims over the stakeholder actional availability.

Table 4. *The intensity of stakeholder availability to protest against those considered as responsible (%)*

	Not at all	In a reduced measure	In a certain measure	In a great measure	Definitely yes
Giulești	12.42	9.80	15.69	33.33	28.10
Uricani	26.80	24.18	29.41	15.69	3.27
Ploiești	43.14	23.53	24.18	7.19	1.31

3.7. *Research limits:* first, our study has revealed the existence of certain correlations between the presence of victims in a crisis event and the stakeholder feelings towards those considered as responsible, but it does not amply reveal the reasons determining the attribution of that responsibility. Secondly, the administration of the survey to a relatively large student population (61.44%) affected somehow the results obtained. Another has come up from the application of the set of questions in two simultaneous ways: offline and online. And finally, the study avoided the approach of media effects on stakeholder perceptions and emotions, taking them just as they are, as an accepted truth.

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