An Investigation into the Role of Image Repair Theory in Strategic Conflict Management.

by

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ABSTRACT

A content analysis was conducted of media releases and media reports relating to a series of sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy in 2002 to investigate the effectiveness of image repair strategies and the usefulness of contingency theory perspectives in crisis management. The study found that communicating during crises is a dialectic process where the conflict of the situation serves to change the perspectives of the institution and the media as the crisis proceeds. Findings also suggested that a proactive approach was most effective in generating positive media coverage. Bolstering was the most effective image repair strategy while apologizing was ineffective. Looking at crises as something that can be managed ignores the complexity of crisis situations. The study suggests a complexity approach to crises might better prepare communicative entities to deal with a crisis.
Introduction

In today’s society, the importance of image cannot be overstated. Therefore, when a reputation is threatened, individuals and organizations are motivated to present an image defense: explanations, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for behavior.

Generally image is defined as the perceptions of a communicative entity\(^1\) shared by an audience (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994; Benoit, 1995; Brinson and Benoit, 1996; Moffitt, 1994). These perceptions are the results of the words and deeds of the communicative entity. One can argue, in the aftermath of such massive scandals as Enron and Worldcom, that particularly public and private organizations are being held accountable more than ever before.

As a result image repair has become an important part of conflict management (Wilcox & Cameron, 2007). An organization’s reputation is normally damaged or threatened when it is held accountable for an undesirable event (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Whether or not statements actually are true is irrelevant; audience perception is all that is needed to damage a reputation. Benoit and Pang hold that there is a proportional relationship between how much a reputation will be damaged and the extent to which the organization or person is held responsible.

Since Benoit’s (1995) formulation of image repair theory most image repair strategies have been studied in the context of an organization’s reaction to a crisis [see Benoit & Pang (2008) for a comprehensive review of this research]. One of the problems with this approach is that in most instances image repair strategies were studies in the context of descriptive rhetorical case analyses with the authors invariably arguing for or against the success of a specific strategy or strategies. Causal research on crisis response and image repair is relatively rare. Causal studies

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\(^1\) A communicative entity is any organization or individual that communicates deliberately or is engaged deliberately in public communication.
show multiple issues affect an organization’s ability to rescue its image after a crisis. For instance, Coombs (1998) determined through experimental research that the level of crisis responsibility and crisis type affect the reputation of an organization and should be considered when image repair strategies are considered. Other factors impacting image repair are perceptions of crisis responsibility, crisis type and organizational reputation (see also Coombs and Holladay, 2001).

In a study of Hong Kong audience reaction to crises Lee (2004) found if a crisis was internally generated and the organization denied crisis responsibility audiences were more negative, less sympathetic, and less trustful of organizations. Interestingly, no response to a crisis generated a positive response from the audience, which the researcher attributed to possible cultural differences between Eastern and Western societies. The researcher found crisis response and crisis cause equally important in the view of the audience. Similarly, Huang (2006) argued for the expansion of empirical research on crisis communication strategies to include culture and media coverage as additional factors impacting image repair strategies.

The findings from these studies support the development of a contingency theory of the strategic management of conflict in public relations (Cameron, Pang & Jin, 2008). Contingency theory “seeks to understand the dynamics, within and without the organization, that affect an accommodative stance [and] … elaborates on the conditions, factors, and forces that undergird such a stance, along a continuum” from advocacy through accommodation (pp. 136-137).

This study falls within the above research program in public relations and aims to advance current image repair theory by determining whether specific image repair strategies, a proactive or reactive stance, the news source, institutional spokesperson, and crisis phase have an impact on whether is news report is positive, negative or balanced.
To determine this, a content analysis was conducted of media releases and stories produced by the U.S. Air Force regarding a series of sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy in 2002.

**The crisis situation**

The Air Force Academy is a public, federally-funded educational institution charged with producing commissioned military officers since 1955. In 1976, the first women cadets were admitted to the Academy and at the time of the crisis women comprised about 17 percent of the cadet wing (Air Force Academy Demographics, 2004).

In January 2003, female cadets began contacting members of Congress with complaints of sexual assault and indifference from commanders. Such complaints, plus inquiries from local congressional leaders, instigated several investigations by the Air Force, the Pentagon, and eventually, Congress itself. The probes documented 142 allegations of sexual assault since 1993 (Loeb, 2003).

As with any unit in the Air Force, climate surveys are conducted annually at the Academy and recent surveys included cadet comments that showed not just a sexual assault problem, but also deeper problems as well. An academy survey indicated as late as 2003 that 20 percent of male cadets still believed women do not belong at the academy (Emery, 2003).

Meanwhile, an independent advisory commission known as The Fowler Commission, (headed by former U.S. Congresswoman Tillie Fowler of Florida), formed to study the academy sexual assault issue. It found that this tolerance of sexual abuse was bred over a period of time. In March 2003 the Secretary of the Air Force, a civilian appointed by the President of the United States and charged with oversight of the entire U.S. Air Force, and the Chief of Staff, the service’s highest ranking military officer, replaced the four top academy leaders and drew up
new institutional policies. They called it the “Agenda for Change,” and it addressed leadership, cadet life and the broader academy climate. (Air Force News Service, March 20, 2003).

A very high level of media interest and Congressional oversight continued at the Academy throughout 2003 and the media continued to scrutinize events related to this story even as late as May 2004. This crisis and the subsequent media coverage serve as the basis for this study.

Theoretical framework

This study employed two theoretical frameworks. The first is image repair strategies in the context of crisis communication. The second is contingency theory in the context of the strategic management of conflict.

Image repair theory

Image repair theory in public relations has its roots embedded in both rhetoric -- mostly political rhetoric -- and social science and as mentioned has a long history of development in public relations. Five image repair strategies with subcategories have emerged from this line of research: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit & Pang, 2008, pp. 247-251).

When using denial a communicative entity can either use simple denial by claiming that it did not perform the act, or shift the blame by saying someone else is responsible. In evasion of responsibility the communicative entity can argue it was provoked and responded to the act of another, argue defeasibility due to a lack of information or ability, claim the event was an accident, or that it had good intentions. Communicative entities can also aim to reduce the offensiveness of an act through bolstering (stressing its own good traits), minimization (the act is not as serious as presented), differentiation (the act is not as offensive as other similar ones),
transcendence (there are more important considerations), attacking the accuser, or compensating the victim. When using corrective action as an image repair strategy the communicative entity offers a plant to solve or prevent a problem. When apologizing the communicative entity practices mortification.

Coombs (1998) also argued that crises situations are located on a continuum of weak personal control over the crisis to strong personal control. Because audiences judge the communicative entity based on the level of control it had over the crisis, different stages on the continuum require different crisis repair strategies. Defensive strategies are more appropriate in situations of weak control, such as natural disasters, while more accommodative strategies such as corrective action and full apology are more appropriate under conditions of strong personal control, such as accidents and acts for which the communicative entity can be blamed.

Image repair strategies are seldom used in isolation. When a communicative entity uses a combination of bolstering, shifting blame and corrective action it uses separation as an image repair strategy. With separation the aim is isolation from crisis responsibility and blaming to a smaller group from within (Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Coombs and Schmidt, 2000). Separation will most likely be used under conditions of strong personal control over the crisis.

It might not always be wise to apply defensive strategies. Lee (2004) found that when the organization used a No Comment strategy rather than a minimization strategy, it generated significantly more trust in the organization and the organization was viewed as having less responsibility for the crisis. Lee attributed this to a cultural difference between Western and Eastern societies, where Eastern societies would be more tolerant of “a silent, reserved gesture” (p. 613), thus pointing to the possibility that culture might have an effect on how image repair strategies are perceived.
From the above it is clear that image repair is not a simple, linear process but dynamic and organic. Contingency theory in the context of strategic conflict management shed more light on this dynamic process.

**Contingency theory in public relations**

This study wishes to emphasize two issues inherent in contingency theory as it relates to crisis situations: strategic intent and complexity. Complexity here, however, refers to complicated rather than complex in the context of complexity theory. Contingency theory argues that eventually all know factors that affect a crisis can be known and predicted (Cameron, Pang, & Jing, 2008). By their very nature crises are unplanned. This leads to the perception that reaction to crises is inevitably reactive. Contingency theory, however, argues that communication between an organization and its public can be managed strategically through four phases, called strategic conflict management (Wilcox & Cameron, 2007). Conflict management consists of issues management, risk management, crisis management and image repair. Each of the first three phases already sets the stage for the image repair phase. In this context image repair strategies are viewed as part of a proactive approach to crisis management.

The first stage includes issues management. Issues management includes identifying, communicating, and influencing a set of organizationally relevant public perceptions and attitudes such as contestable claims about facts, values, or policy – all aspects of image repair strategy (Heath, 1997).

By extension, image repair theory in public relations is also linked to risk communication. Risk communication “addresses scientific evaluations of risk, the perceptions lay people have of them, and actions that are warranted in light of the degree of risk and people’s tolerance of them” (Palenchar and Heath, 2002, p. 127). Otway (1992) noted, “The main product
of risk communication is not information, but the quality of the social relationship it supports. Risk communication is not an end itself; it is an enabling agent to facilitate the continual evolution of relationships” (p. 227).

Crisis response, the third phase, is viewed as a symbolic resource that can be used to protect an organization’s reputation and to affect stakeholders’ future interactions with the organization by shaping perceptions of the crisis and the organization itself (Coombs, 1999). Such responses align themselves perfectly with the goals of image repair strategy. Situations likely to require apologetic discourse are accidents, scandals and illegalities, product safety incidents, and social irresponsibility – all likely to evoke criticism from organizational stakeholders (Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Coombs, 1995). Most current work argues that crisis is a natural phase of an organization’s development and will affect virtually every enterprise at one time or another. Therefore, crisis communication and crisis management are essential skills for leaders at all levels to master, or at least be well-versed in (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). The fourth phase in the conflict management process is image repair, as discussed above.

Contingency theory further argues that simple linear relations are not adequate to predict the outcome of complex public relations situations and “offers a perspective to examine how one party related to another through the enactment of a given stance toward the other party at a given point in time” (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2008, p. 136). In contingency theory stance is measured on a continuum from advocacy on the one end to accommodation on the other. This stance is dynamic and changes based on the situation. The variables determining stance are far too elaborate to be described here but can be categorized into predisposing factors relating to characteristics internal to the organization and situational factors relating to the organization’s external environment. A shift in stance depends on whether situational factors are strong enough
to change predisposition. Also, the stance and strategies of an organization and its publics can change over time.

Subsequently Cameron, Pang, & Jin (2008) merged the stance continuum of contingency theory with the image repair continuum mentioned above. One can for instance argue that if the cause of a crisis is external to the organization, and requires less accommodation of its publics, the organization will more likely use advocacy-type image repair strategies such as attacking the accuser and denial. If an organization has strong personal control over the crisis and strong perceptions of crisis responsibility exist, one can argue on the basis of contingency theory that the organization will use more accommodative image repair strategies such as bolstering, corrective action and apology. This, however, remains an over-simplification of the contingency theory because of the multiple internal and external factors that can affect the stance of both the organization and its publics. For instance, contingency theory also posits that if external issues to the organization, such as legal or regulatory constraints, affect the organization, it will likely use less accommodative strategies.

The above theoretical foundation leads to the following research questions in terms of the use of image repair strategy:

**RQ1:** Which image repair strategies, if any, did the Air Force employ in dealing with the Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal?

**RQ2:** What was the effect of image repair strategies on story balance?

Contingency theory argues that although complicated, multiple factors can predict the outcome of strategy use. This theoretical stance yielded the following research questions:

**RQ3:** Is a proactive or reactive approach by the Air Force more effective in securing a positive or balanced news story?
RQ 4: What is the relationship between story balance and issue stage?

RQ5: Which factors were most likely to affect story balance?

Methodology

To answer these research questions a content analysis was conducted of news releases the U.S. Air Force issued at the height of the scandal and also of six major newspapers, three with a national reputation and three from the areas closest to the Academy. The three national newspapers selected were USA Today, The New York Times, and The Washington Post because of their national distribution and influence. An initial review of stories in the top ten daily metropolitan newspapers, according to Editor and Publisher (2006), indicated the vast majority of the printed stories in these newspapers were stories reprinted from wire services such as Associated Press, Reuters, and Knight-Ridder. The researchers determined that these three newspapers by far covered the scandal most extensively. Also, The Washington Post had a beat reporter specifically dedicated to the story. The New York Times reported each development and also had a team of beat reporters consistently covering the story. As could be expected, the major Colorado daily newspapers, The Denver Post, Rocky Mountain News, and The Gazette in Colorado Springs covered the issue extensively.

The news releases for this study were drawn from the Air Force’s internet newswire service, AFLINK (www.af.mil). AFLINK is the main source of non-queried information for journalists and the public. Only those releases about the sexual assaults and their impact on the military and written solely by U.S. Air Force or Department of Defense personnel were selected.

While widely recognized as a quantitative research method (Kerlinger, 2000; Stacks, 2002; Stempel, 2003), some researchers note that content analysis also encompasses aspects of qualitative research. Stacks (2002) argued “it is an informal method in that the data it operates on
are basically qualitative-deriving, from responses to open-ended questions or from observing
certain messages in the media” allowing the researcher to “look at qualitative data in a
quantitative manner” (p. 107). This study analyzed both latent and manifest content. Manifest
content is obvious and determined by journalistic conventions such as place and space in the
medium, word count, and other formal and structural factors. Latent content is less obvious in
that it “deals with the underlying or deeper meanings of the message” (p. 109), which leaves it
open to criticism of validity because it is largely subjective and susceptible to researcher bias.
However, the application of sound scientific research methods, such as measuring inter-coder
reliability, and establishing valid, sufficient sample sizes, effectively address such criticisms.

The news releases and news stories used in the analysis were issued and published from
February to May 2003. The events at the Air Force Academy occurred in the fall of 2002, but did
not become public news until early in 2003, when a Colorado Springs television news affiliate
first broke the story. It was immediately picked up by local newspapers such as The Denver Post
and The Gazette, and subsequently by national news media. It culminated in the dismissal of four
senior leaders from the Academy in the spring, and U.S. Senate hearings in the summer. These
four months were by far the busiest timeframe of the scandal, and included the initial breaking of
the story, responses from the President of the United States, members of Congress, Air Force and
Academy leaders, cadets, relatives, alumni, faculty and staff, civilian assault/rape counselors,
local law enforcement, and Colorado civic leaders. Additionally, the corrective actions the
organization took and the removal of the Academy’s four senior leaders garnered more media
attention that any other timeframe for the scandal.

The LexisNexis search engine database (http://lexis-nexis.com) was the sole source used
to gather news stories because it is renowned throughout the academic world as reliable,
extensive, up-to-date, and technologically-capable of providing multiple sources of news and media coverage. This guided news search in LexisNexis required five distinct steps, namely identification of news category, geographic location, actual news source, identification of search terms, and the date range. Editorials, letters to the editor, and stories very loosely related that contained no more than a single passing reference to the Air Force scandal were omitted. In all, 208 stories from the six newspapers met the selection criteria. Twenty Air Force-produced news stories were analyzed. In total, 228 products were coded.

Each product was analyzed for content in multiple categories: military or media product, month of publication, length of story in words, placement of story (front page, metro section, etc), sources of quotes, and whether the story was proactive or reactive. Trained coders analyzed latent content to determine which image repair tactic was employed by the Air Force in the specific release or story (see figure 1 for the typology of image repair strategies). Because the Air Force could employ more than one tactic at a time image repair strategies were not coded as mutually exclusive; however, coding was exhaustive in that all categories as defined by Benoit and Pang (2008) were applied. Also, the coders analyzed each news release to determine whether it was positive, negative, or balanced. (See Appendix A for the full code sheet.)

Initially two coders were used: a researcher and a graduate student. The first coder analyzed all stories and the second coder analyzed 22.3 percent of the newspaper stories and 33.3 percent of the news releases. A third, independent person randomly selected the news products the second coder analyzed.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, Holsti’s formula (1969) was used to produce a reliability coefficient of .88. Although the resulting coefficient fell within statistically acceptable levels (>.80), Holsti’s method is sometimes criticized because the possibility exists that coder
agreement may occur “by chance – an amount that is a function of the number of categories in the analysis” (p. 157). However, with the high number of choices available to the coders (they were asked to choose between 15 tactics) the likelihood of coder agreement strictly by chance was minimal.

Coded data was transferred to a spreadsheet and the data was subsequently analyzed using *SPSS* (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Data analysis consisted of running frequencies and cross-tabulations. Chi square analysis was used to determine relationships between variables. To determine the direction of the relationship only those cases where the actual count was larger than the expected count were used for analysis and will be discussed here (Stacks & Hocking, 1998). The level of significance was set at $\alpha = .05$.

**Results**

Before each research question is addressed individually, descriptive statistics are reported briefly. In total, 228 products were analyzed and coded. Of these 20 (8.8%) were news releases produced by the Air Force, and 208 (91.2%) were newspaper stories.

Regional newspapers published more stories on this topic than national newspapers. *The Denver Post* published the most with 35.1% (n=73), followed by *The Gazette* with 23.6% (n=49), *Rocky Mountain News* with 21.2% (n=44), *The New York Times* with 11.1% (n=23), *The Washington Post* with 5.3% (n=11), and *USA Today* with 3.8% (n=8).

The majority of media stories arrived mid-crisis. In February 15.4% (n=32) of the news stories were published, in March 42.8% (n=89), in April 27.9% (n=58), and in May 13.9% (n=29). Length of story was based on the word-count provided by Lexis-Nexis. By-lines, datelines, and head lines are not included in these statistics. Of the 228 stories analyzed, 35.5%
(n=81) had fewer than 500 words, 41.2% (n=94) contained 500 to 1000 words, and 23.2% (n=53) had more than 1000 words.

Placement of the story is important to determine importance, message delivery and reception. Typically, metropolitan newspapers have different sections, each with its own front page. In terms of garnering visibility, it is better for a story to be placed on the front page of an interior section than to be placed inside the front section (Eyes on the News, Poynter Institute, 1991). The majority of the stories was placed in Section A of the newspapers (59.5%, n=138), with 25% (n=58) on the front page and 34.5% (n=80) on the inside of Section A. The balance of the stories (28.9%, n=67) was placed in the Local/Metro Section. The placement of three stories could not be determined.

When coding for story balance, all releases the Air Force produced were processed as missing data. Positive news reports were in the minority (19.7%, n=41). Stories were more balanced (44.7%, n=93) than negative (35.6%, n=74). Cross-tabulation showed that the national newspapers were more likely to report on the issue in a negative way. Analyzing the count of positive, negative and balanced within each source, 60.9% (n=14) of The New York Times stories were negative, as were 54.5% (n=6) of those in The Washington Post, and 37.5% (n=3) of those in USA Today. Of the three regional newspapers The Denver Post published the most negative stories (34.2%, n=25), followed by The Gazette (28.6%, n=14), and Rocky Mountain News (27.3%, n=12). With the exception of The New York Times (26.1%, n=6) and The Washington Post (45.5%, n=5), all the other newspaper produced more balanced stories than either positive or negative ones.

In coding for the sources quoted, it is important to note that although multiple sources per story could be coded, only one box could be selected by the coder to categorize this speaker.
Coders were instructed to check the box that best represented the primary role the speaker was in at the time. For example, an assault victim could also be an academy alum, but if she spoke as a victim, that would be the way her role was coded. Every quote from all 228 products was analyzed. The breakdown between the Air Force releases and the newspaper stories showed the Air Force was most likely to quote a senior leader (70%, n=14), followed by an Air Force public affairs spokesperson (20%, n=4), another Air Force source (15%, n=3), and a legislator (10%, n=2). The Air Force only cited a victim once.

Newspapers followed a similar pattern with senior leaders from the Air Force most quoted (51.9%, n=108), followed by current or former legislators (49%, n=102), an Air Force public affairs spokesperson (33.7%, n=70), a civilian (21.6%, n=45), and another member of the Air Force (20.8%, n=43). Sexual assault counselors and advocates (17.3%, n=36) and assault victims (13.5%, n=28) were the least quoted.

If the product was a newspaper story, coders were asked to indicate whether the story was proactive (initiated by the military) or reactive (military reply/response to media inquiry). Coders could also choose “undetermined.” Air Force releases were not coded for this variable and were treated as missing data. Results indicated that the Air Force was proactive in 42.1% (n=86) and reactive in 30.9% (n=63) of instances. In 27% (n=55) of instances stance could not be determined.

The author’s main subject of criticism in each news report was identified. The subject of attack was not only related to negative stories, but also to positive and balanced ones. In 24.6% (n=50) of instances policy was attacked, followed by an individual, such as a leader, (24.1%, n=49) and the Air Force (22.7%, n=46).

Next, each research question will be treated individually.
**RQ1: Which image repair strategies, if any, did the Air Force employ in dealing with the Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal?**

To include all data in one data set for comparative purposes all stories, i.e. news releases and media coverage, were submitted to the same code sheet, although separated into two categories. All news reports were treated as missing data in the section dealing with image repair strategies in news releases, while news releases were treated as missing data in the analysis of image repair strategies in the news reports. Results showed that sometimes multiple image repair tactics were used in a single release.

The Air Force mostly used corrective action (75%, n=15), bolstering (65%, n=13), defeasibility (40%, n=8), and mortification (20%, n=4). The tactics least used were shifting the blame (10%, n=2), denial (5%, n=1), provocation (5%, n=1), and transcendence (5%, n=1). The Air Force never used accident, good intention, minimization, differentiation, attacking the accuser, and compensation as image repair strategies.

Table 1 shows the most prevalent image repair strategy found in the newspaper stories were corrective action (38.9%, n=81), defeasibility (22.6%, n=47), bolstering (21.2%, n=44), shifting the blame (13.5%, n=28), and mortification (11.5%, n=24). The strategies least used, in descending order, were transcendence (5.8%, n=12), simple denial (5.8%, n=12), minimization (2.4%, n=5), attack the accuser (1.9%, n=4), compensation (1.0%, n=2), accident (.05%, n=1), and differentiation (.05%, n=1). Two strategies not mentioned at all were provocation and good intentions. In 30.3% (n=63) of news stories, no military comment or strategy was recorded.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**
RQ2: What was the effect of image repair strategies on story balance?

There was a statistically significant correlation between story balance and the use of defeasibility (lack of information or ability) as an image repair strategy ($\chi^2_{df=2} = 6.974, p < .031$). In 48.9% (n=23) of cases, stories were negative when defeasibility was used.

Story balance and bolstering (stressing good traits) also produced a statistically significant correlation ($\chi^2_{df=2} = 23.757, p < .001$). In 45.5% (n=20) of cases, stories were positive when bolstering was used as a strategy. In 38.9% (n=65) and 47.6% (n=78) of cases, stories were negative or balanced respectively when bolstering was not used. This indicates that bolstering was a positive strategy for the Air Force.

Story balance and mortification (take responsibility and apologize) also yielded a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2_{df=2} = 9.107, p < .05$). In this instance, mortification produced 25.0% (n=6) of positive stories and 58.3% (n=14) of negative stories. When mortification was not used, it produced a balanced story in 48.4% (n=89) of cases. This indicates that mortification was not a good image repair strategy for the Air Force.

It is also important to point out that a statistically significant correlation was found between story balance and no tactics as a strategy ($\chi^2_{df=2} = 10.427, p < .01$). In this instance, using no discernable tactic produced a balanced story in 60.3% (n=38) of cases. This goes against the conventional wisdom that an organization should react under all circumstances.

In all, the above results show that image repair strategy does influence the balance of newspaper stories.

One of the major aims of this study was to determine which variables affected story balance. As a result image repair strategies were correlated with story balance using chi square analysis. As mentioned, to determine the direction of the effect, only those cases where the actual
count was larger than the expected count were included in the analysis and will be discussed here.

**RQ3: Is a proactive or reactive approach by the Air Force more effective in securing a positive or balanced news story?**

The correlation between story balance and stance (whether the Air Force was proactive or reactive) produced a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2_{df=4} = 79.722, p<.001$). In 90% (n=36) of cases when the Air Force was proactive it yielded a positive story. In 61.1% (n=44) of cases a reactive stance would yield a negative story. Balanced stories were evident in 42.4% (n=39) of proactive cases and in 38.0% (n=35) of cases where no specific stance could be determined. This supports a strategic and intentional approach in the crisis stage of conflict management, which will include a decision not to comment or to react.

Furthermore, the correlation between a proactive or reactive approach and issue stage indicated that the Air Force was reactive during February and March but proactive during April ($\chi^2_{df=6} = 31.656, p<.001$). As the next research question shows, this also had an impact on story balance.

**RQ 4: What is the relationship between story balance and issue stage?**

The correlation between crisis stage and story balance yielded a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2_{df=6} = 20.978, p<.01$). February and March, the first two months of the crisis, yielded negative stories. Of the stories yielded in February, 20.3% (n=15) were negative, as were 55.4% (n=41) in March. In contrast, the only statistically significant results in April and May were between positive story balance and crisis stage with 48.8% (n=20) and 14.6% (n=6) in April and May respectively. In April, 28% (n=26) and in May 18.3% (n=17) of the news reports...
were balanced. This indicates that the issues phase started out as being reported in a negative way but moved to more positive and balanced stories as the issue unfolded.

**RQ5: Which factors were most likely to affect story balance?**

This study could analyze a limited number of factors in terms of story balance because a content analysis cannot yield information about situational factors that might affect story balance. Nonetheless, this study did point to some factors that might affect media coverage and should be considered when dealing with a crisis.

**Type of attack**

The correlation between story balance and type of attack produced a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2_{df=6} = 70.848, p<.001$). In negative stories an individual would be attacked in 40% (n=28) and an organization in 34.3% (n=24) of instances. Stories were deemed to be balanced when policy was attacked (30.4%, n=28). This indicates that addressing the crisis at the more abstract level of policy rather than personality or organization was beneficial to the Air Force.

**Source of quote**

There was a statistically significant relationship between story balance and when the victim of assault was quoted ($\chi^2_{df=2} = 19.952, p<.001$). In 71.4% (n=20) of cases when the victim was quoted, the story was negative. Conversely, the story was positive in 22.8% (n=41) and balanced in 47.2% (n=85) of cases when the victim was not quoted.

There also was a statistically significant correlation between story balance and when an Air Force member was quoted ($\chi^2_{df=2} = 6.306, p<.05$). In 32.6% (n=14) of cases when an Air Force member was quoted, the story was positive. The story was negative in 35.4% (n=58) and
balanced in 48.2% (n=79) of cases when an Air Force member was not quoted, indicating that quoting an Air Force member had a more negative rather than positive impact on story outcome.

The correlation between story balance and legislator as news source produced a statistically significant relationship between the two variables ($\chi^2_{df=2} =20.958, p<.001$). In 42.2% (n=43) of cases when a legislator was quoted, the story was negative, and balanced in 51.0% (n=52) of cases. The story was positive in 32.1% (n=34) of cases when a legislator was not quoted. This indicates that involving legislators in the debate brought a level of political, and therefore conflict-ridden, attention to the issue that had a negative outcome for the Air Force.

Similarly, the correlation between story balance and a sexual assault counselor/advocate produced a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2_{df=2} =6.972, p<.05$). In 50.0% (n=18) of cases when an advocate was quoted, the story was negative. The story was positive in 22.7% (n=39) and balanced in 44.8% (n=77) of cases when an advocate was not quoted, indicating that advocates had a negative outcome for the Air Force.

**Placement**

As expected, the correlation between balance and placement produced a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2_{df=6} =13.660, p<.05$). In 37.8% (n=28) and 40.5% (n=30) of cases a story was negative when it was placed on the front page or in section 1 of the newspaper respectively. In 39.0% (n=16) and 41.5% (n=17) stories were positive when they were placed in section A or the local/metro sections respectively. Stories were balanced in 38.7% (n=36) of cases when they were in the local/metro section. This indicated that in this case positive stories were most likely deemed less newsworthy, which is in line with current journalistic conventions.
Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of image repair strategies the U.S. Air Force used during the crisis at the Air Force Academy. It also attempted to further our understanding of contingency theory in the context of conflict management, particularly in the crisis and image repair stages.

Implications for contingency theory

Perhaps the most significant finding of this research is that crisis management and image repair are dialectic processes, i.e. they have an ebb and flow that fluctuate and are based in conflict. Managing conflict through the four processes of issues, risk, crisis, and image restoration management cannot be viewed as a linear process, but rather as a ritualistic communication process. This supports Cameron, Pang, and Jing’s (2008) approach that simple linear relations are not adequate to predict the outcome of complex public relations situations.

It is important to address the complexity of this case. Cameron et al (2008) argue that a communicative entity’s stance can change depending on whether situational factors (external to the entity) can change predisposition (internal to the entity). In this case several negative situational factors affected the issue, such as the involvement of legislators and even the President. This was exacerbated by the fact that it was clear the Air Force had strong internal control over the situation, i.e. they could be held responsible. One thus wonders how they were able to, in a period of a mere four months, go from utterly negative press coverage, to containment of the crisis.

Contingency theory argues there are multiple factors that might have affected this outcome, such as the separation strategy in which the Air Force used the combination of bolstering (reminding audiences of all the Academy’s good attributes), shifting blame to a small
group of people within the Academy (leaders in the Academy were to blame), and corrective action (people were fired and policies and procedures were revised). These were the first, second, and fourth most used image repair strategies in this case.

Another factor that could not be measured in this content analysis but that cannot be ignored is the reputation of the U.S. Military. HarrisInteractive (2004) reported that since 1966 leaders in the military consistently have generated the most confidence among U.S. citizens. In 2003, the time of this crisis, 62% of participants in their annual Confidence in Leaders of Institutions survey said they had a great deal of confidence in military leaders, 31% more than the major academic institutions, which were second on the list. Many other situational factors that could not be measured in this analysis, also could have affected the outcome of this crisis, such as the “9/11” effect (p. 1). The fact that so little attention was given to the victims and their advocates might be an indication that the media might not have supported the idea of women in the Academy in the first place. There still is a lot of bias against women in the military in general and as members of elite academies in particular (Emery, 2003).

All these factors indicate that it will indeed be very difficult, if not impossible, to predict at any time which image repair strategies will be the most effective or which specific situational or predispositional circumstances will successfully predict the appropriate strategies to use during a crisis (Murphy, 1996; Weick, 2001; Seeger, 2002; Gilpin & Murphy, 2006). These findings suggest that a more appropriate theoretical approach to crisis situations lies in complexity theory. While contingency-based approaches stress the ability to manage forward by putting the necessary systems and structures in place, complexity theory argues that miniscule events can trigger very large crises indeed. Weick (2001) argues “crises can have small, volitional beginnings in human action. Small events are carried forward, cumulate with other
events, and over time systematically construct an environment that is a rare combination of unexpected simultaneous failures” (p. 228). The crisis at the Air Force Academy bears witness to this. There had to be a first sexual harassment event, “the small volitional beginnings in human action” Weick refers to. Because nothing was done about this single incident it “over time systematically [constructed] an environment [of abuse] that is a rare combination of unexpected simultaneous failures.”

The general adoption of complexity theory as a framework for crisis management in public relations is a long way off. This would mean people and organizations embrace uncertainty, which goes against every tenet of contingency theory. Also, contingency theory is comfortable and “take the seductive form of recipes for success” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006, p. 41). The results of this study indeed suggest that there are certain contingencies. However, these contingencies only offer a small window onto the landscape of the network of possibilities that might affect a crisis.

Public relations researchers will be better served by embracing emergence (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006). Emergence suggests that organizational behavior in every form, be it structural (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006) or strategic (Quinn, Mintzberg, & James, 1991). As Gilpin and Murphy (2006) stated, “The future is unknowable yet recognizable, the product of everyday microinteraction among people, entities, and the environment” (p. 382). Practitioners will be better served if they gave attention to the microenvironment and involve themselves with their publics at the microlevel (Holtzhausen, 2000).

Implications for image restoration theory

Another important part of this study was to advance current image repair theory by determining whether specific image repair tactics encourage a positive or negative reporting
trend. It is important to note again that when this research refers to positive, negative, or balanced outcomes and stories, it was from the perspective of the U.S. Air Force and not the victims. This was not meant to minimize the effects of this situation on the victims but rather to look at how the image repair strategies organizations use, often through the assistance of their public relations or public affairs officers, can influence (or not influence) newspaper coverage. In actual fact, the omission of victims’ voices from media coverage and the perspective of the Academy is the most disturbing aspect of this research. It was disappointing that the media least quoted a victim or her advocate. It was clear that the media overwhelmingly addressed this issue at a policy level, which was good for the Air Force but not for the victims.

The US Air Force employed several of the image repair strategies found in Benoit’s taxonomy. In fact, 12 of the 14 image repair tactics Benoit describes in his taxonomy appear in the newspaper stories covering the crisis (see Table 2).

The most prevalent were corrective action, with the Air Force arguing it has a plan in place to solve and prevent action from reoccurring; bolstering by stressing its good traits only; defeasibility, arguing that it had a lack of information or ability; and mortification, taking full responsibility and apologizing for its action. One can argue that these are generally more positive strategies than those used least: shifting the blame by arguing someone else was responsible; denying that the event occurred; being provoked by someone else; or transcendence, arguing that although the act was negative, there are other vital considerations at stake.

When the Air Force used lack of information or ability to explain the situation, stories were negative, indicating this is a poor excuse. Despite the accepted wisdom in public relations that mortification, i.e. taking responsibility for the act and apologizing, is the best way to restore image and move on, this strategy overwhelmingly produced negative stories. For the Air Force it
appeared that bolstering, i.e. stressing the institution’s good traits, was the best image repair strategy to use. This might be due to the stature of the country’s armed forces in general, as reported earlier.

Contrary to belief, not applying any strategy might sometimes also be wise. In this instance, using no discernable tactic produced a balanced story in the vast majority of cases. This supports Lee’s (2004) findings that when the organization used a No Comment strategy it was more credible. Lee attributed this to cultural differences between East and West but this study proved otherwise. The correlation between image repair strategy and crisis stage further supports the use of no specific strategy as a positive approach for the Air Force. The results indicated the story balance for the first two months were significantly more negative, while story balance for the last two months were significantly more positive and balanced – the stage where the least strategies were the used.

This study overwhelmingly confirmed the notion that a proactive approach is more effective in securing a positive or balanced news story than a reactive approach. A complexity approach to crisis management does not preclude a proactive approach. It merely stresses another way of dealing proactively with issues, such as sharing complex issues through storytelling and scenario planning (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006). It is apparent from the way in which the Air Force dealt with the crisis in the initial stages that it was not predominantly proactive.

As mentioned before, perhaps the most important finding was the dialectic nature of a crisis. The results of this study indicated a strong correlation between story balance and issue stage. Issue stage, as it relates to this study, can be defined as the point in the crisis that a particular action is taken – early, middle, or late. Results showed that at the earliest stage of the crisis, when very few image repair strategies were used and the reaction was mostly reactive,
news coverage was mostly negative. But both the media and the organization learnt something in
the process. The Air Force learnt how to deal with the issue and the media found a more
balanced way to look at the events, which implies that learning occurred on both ends of the
spectrum.

Again these findings support a complexity theory approach to crisis communication. As
Gilpin and Murphy (2006) suggest, a naturalistic approach to management or emergent
management skills, which implies learning through the process of the crisis, is a far better
approach than trying to determine every step before a crisis. Being prepared to learn through the
process allows for a more open-minded approach, which can yield more and better solutions.

Statistics point to the importance of the timely application of image repair techniques. For
example, the Air Force was late to engage the media on this topic, which generated more
negative stories at the beginning of the crisis. Once the Air Force engaged the media more
actively, the crisis was already at a point of media saturation, making it more difficult to get its
key messages out into the media, or more importantly, to get its side in print and into the public’s
mind for consideration.

In the initial stages of the crisis (February), the Air Force took little action to defend
itself, thus, most of the stories were negative. As the story gained momentum (March and April),
and more negative stories appeared, the Air Force was prompted into action (response). Thus,
stories became more balanced. As the story waned (May), the Air Force was able to get its
message heard, and stories became more balanced, and even positive in some cases. This data
supports the notion that the earlier an organization rises to defend itself, the better chances it has
of rescuing its reputation.
Studying image repair strategy remains problematic. One of its weaknesses is the inability to correlate image repair strategies used in media releases and image repair strategies reported on in news reports because it is difficult, if not even impossible, to determine what news coverage resulted from specific news releases. Nonetheless, image repair theory is an important area of research with many implications for both mass communications and public relations.

At no time is communication more important for an organization than in time of crisis. The subject of crisis communication is well-researched and plentiful – so much so that most public relations practitioners are well-versed in seeing exactly how an organization’s reputation can be damaged before it actually happens. Reputation might well be a key concept, which means that the foundations for weathering a crisis might have been laid many decades before the crisis took place. However, considering alternative approaches to handling crises, as Gilpin and Murphy (2006) suggested, might serve public relations practitioners better than more traditional contingency approaches. Embracing complexity might provide more adaptability to weather the crisis than a fixed approach that does not address the unique issues raised during every crisis.
References


Table 2. Tactics Found in Newspaper Stories, in Descending Order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Corrective action – plan in place to solve and prevent reoccurrence</td>
<td>81 (38.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Defeasibility – lack of information or ability</td>
<td>47 (22.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Bolstering – stress good traits</td>
<td>44 (21.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Shifting the blame – act performed by another</td>
<td>28 (13.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Mortification – take responsibility and apologize for action</td>
<td>24 (11.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Simple denial – did not perform the act</td>
<td>12 (5.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Transcendence – act is negative, but other vital considerations at stake</td>
<td>12 (5.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Minimization – act is not very serious</td>
<td>5 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Attack accuser – reduce credibility of accuser</td>
<td>4 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Compensation – reimburse victims</td>
<td>2 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Differentiation – act is less offensive than appears</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Accident – act was unintentional mishap</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Provocation – responded to action of another</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Good intentions – meant well in doing the act</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A: Code Book

Code Book

This codebook is designed to assist in the process of coding the attached news releases and stories. The releases and stories are to be coded in the precise manner as the codebook reads.

Coding Instructions

This study will examine news releases and stories regarding the sexual assault scandal at the U.S. Air Force Academy as produced and distributed by the Department of Defense and/or the U.S. Air Force. Additionally, stories printed in various daily newspapers (as detailed in the methodology section of this research) will also be examined.

When coding individual releases or stories, you should examine the content carefully. You may write directly on the hardcopies of the releases/stories, marking them with pen, pencil or a highlighter to identify image repair tactics.

Code Sheet
Part One—General (Nominal) Information

To be filled out for each news release/story used for this study.

1.) Indicate if item is military product or independent media product:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Product</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Product</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.) Indicate Original Month of Publication:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 2003</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2003</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2003</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2003</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.) Indicate Length of Story/Release in Words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 500 words</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-1000 words</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1000 words</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.) If Product Is Newspaper Story, Indicate Placement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front Page</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Section (Section A)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local/Metro Section</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.) If Product Is Newspaper Story, Indicate Source:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver Post</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocky Mountain News</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Springs Gazette</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.) If product is newspaper story, indicate whether it casts the U.S. Air Force Academy and its leadership in an overall positive, negative, or balanced light:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.) If product is newspaper story, indicate which sources the author cited in the story. Check all that apply, but use only one category per each person, i.e Chief of Staff of the Air Force is a General, yet is also an Air Force member. You would check only the box for Senior Leader. Sexual Assault counselor who happened to be an Air Force member would be categorized only as Sexual Assault Counselor, etc:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Air Force Public Affairs Spokesperson</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force Senior Leader (Colonel, General, Secretary of AF)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault Victim</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Air Force Member</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current or Former Legislators (Senator, Congressmen, etc.)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault Counselors/Advocates</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian (Friend, Relative, Academy Alumni, etc)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.) If product is newspaper story, indicate whether the story was proactive (initiated by the military) or reactive (military reply/response to media inquiry):

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9.) For the given newspaper article, indicate the MAIN subject of criticism or “attack” by the author. Select only one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual(s) (Commandant, Superintendent, AF Secretary, etc)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy (Sexual harassment policy, etc.)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization, (DoD, Air Force, Academy, Commission, etc.)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part Two – Qualitative Data
In defining his Image Repair Theory, Benoit organized his typology into five distinct categories, three of which have variants or subcategories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

9.) For each news release produced by the military, indicate which of the following tactics may be found. Please check all that apply. Please note that you are checking only for an appearance of the tactics, not the number of times it appears.

| Simple denial – did not perform the act       | 1 |
| Shifting the blame – act performed by another | 2 |
| Provocation – responded to act or action of another | 3 |
| Defeasibility – lack of information or ability | 4 |
| Accident – act was unintentional mishap       | 5 |
| Good Intentions – meant well in doing the act | 6 |
| Bolstering – stress good traits              | 7 |
| Minimization – act not very serious          | 8 |
| Differentiation – act is less offensive than it appears | 9 |
| Transcendence – act is negative, but other vital considerations at stake | 10 |
| Attack accuser – reduce credibility of accuser | 11 |
| Compensation – reimburse victims and affected persons | 12 |
| Corrective Action - plan in place to solve and prevent reoccurrence | 13 |
| Mortification - take responsibility and apologize for action | 14 |

10.) For each newspaper story, indicate which of the following tactics may be found. Please check all that apply. Please note that you are checking only for an appearance of the tactics, not the number of times it appears.

| Simple denial – did not perform the act       | 1 |
| Shifting the blame – act performed by another | 2 |
| Provocation – responded to act or action of another | 3 |
| Defeasibility – lack of information or ability | 4 |
| Accident – act was unintentional mishap       | 5 |
| Good Intentions – meant well in doing the act | 6 |
| Bolstering – stress good traits              | 7 |
| Minimization – act not very serious          | 8 |
| Differentiation – act is less offensive than it appears | 9 |
| Transcendence – act is negative, but other vital considerations at stake | 10 |
| Attack accuser – reduce credibility of accuser | 11 |
| Compensation – reimburse victims and affected persons | 12 |
| Corrective Action - plan in place to solve and prevent reoccurrence | 13 |
| Mortification - take responsibility and apologize for action | 14 |