

## Reaction Paper Melissa Scudo

The readings this week examined definitions of crises, explored examples of different crises and discussed one of the common outcomes of crises – the development of policies to address circumstances that contributed to the crisis.

In *Business and Political Dimensions in Disaster Management*, Birkland et al. provide a definition of crisis as being “characterized by threat, an element of surprise and reduced response time.” This paper discussed how businesses manage crisis, particularly the public participation’s response to both the crisis and the business’s contribution to the crisis. An important point that the authors make is that the political and public response to crises cannot be truly “managed.” It contains an element of unpredictability.

Another approach to examine crises is to consider their role as a “focusing event.” In *Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting*, Birkland describes focusing events as sudden, attention-grabbing events that change the dominant issues on the agenda in the policy forum. Specifically, Birkland describes the power that crises and focusing events exert in interacting with group politics to influence the policy agenda. Focusing events, often sensationalized by the media, capture the attention of the public and provide fuel for advocacy groups concerned with the circumstances that they feel contribute to the development of the crisis or focusing event. Birkland also highlighted the extent to which a focusing event can drive policy setting often depends on the prior organization of groups dedicated to the issues surrounding the event; i.e. prior organization of groups is important for them to utilize the attention generated from the event to formulate changes in policies and to influence the policy makers capable of translating policy proposals into policy changes. Another interesting point made in this paper is how the dynamics of a particular community (its involvement in public agenda setting and the approach that it takes to policy development) in the response to focusing events. Responses to focusing events, including the pace at which groups organize to respond and approach policy changes can vary significantly among different communities.

John Kingdon describes focusing events as providing the “push to get the attention of people in and around government.” Until there’s a crisis, an issue is often just one of many issues. A crisis brings attention to a cause that a government can simply not ignore. The paper discusses several crises, including the falling of a bridge in Ohio and airplane and other transportation accidents that led to the development of important policies to address the existence of hazards that can contribute to crises and large-scale disasters.

Birkland’s paper, *Wake of the Exxon Valdez* provided an interesting case study of the influence and power of oil spills to lead to policy change. As a focusing event, the oil spill had symbolic and emotional power that, through the media, captured the attention of citizens and served as an opportunity for environmentalists to push through policy changes that had been tabled for years.

My reaction from these readings is the disheartening feeling that most policy changes are reactive rather than proactive and that the likelihood of policy change is tied directly to the political influence of the interest groups lobbying for changes and the pressure upon the government to respond to crises, rather than mitigate risk that contributes to hazards. On the other hand, some crises have led to progressive policy changes, which to me, exhibits the power of individuals, organized in groups, to effect change.