The Aftermath of the South Korea Ferry Disaster - Organisational Responses and Learning

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Introduction
On the morning of 16 April 2014, the South Korea Ferry, Sewol, carrying four hundred seventy six people, sank on her way to Jeju Island from Incheon. In all, 295 passengers died in the accident including 245 secondary school students on their school trip. The aftermath of this disaster was like a roller coaster ride. The whole nation comforted and consoled the family members, while showing post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Some people vented their frustration and anger on the government and some cried out for the societal norm change. In midst of it, government officials and agencies, a legal system, media and political parties responded on their own ways.

Several models have been developed to produce a generic pathway from systems failure to cultural readjustment (Turner & Pidgeon 1997, Toft & Reynolds 1997, Elliott 2009, Aini & Fakhrul-Razi 2010, Stead & Smallman 1999). All the models effectively have three stages: a pre-disaster (relative system stability with latent conditions), disaster (triggering event and escalation; recovery and salvage) and post disaster (inquiry and aftermath). The post disaster stage consists of inquiry and reporting, feedback, social justice and social and legislative reform. It is known that there are many factors influencing organisational learning and cultural adjustment after disasters, but very little is known about how those factors influence them. This aim of this study is to investigate post-disaster organisational responses and how those responses made a positive or negative contribution to the organisational learning in the context of the South Korea ferry disaster.

Method:
This study was carried out mainly based on articles including columns and editorials in major Korean and international newspapers, news magazines and broadcasting medias, such as Chosun-ilbo, Donga-ilbo, Yonhap News, Weekly/Monthly Chosun of Korea, Financial Times of UK, and CNN of USA from April 2014 to December 2014. The timeline analysis of major responses of the various organisations will be carried out based on Elliott’s (2009) organisation learning process map from crisis. Further investigation will be carried out with a question of how factors such as culture, power and politics formed barriers to organisational learning.

Results and discussion:
Further analysis will be carried out, but initial finding was that blaming culture and politicisation of the disaster influenced the post-disaster responses of many organisations. The blaming culture prevalent in the Korean society led many organisations to adopt punitive responses to this disaster. For example, accident investigations by a government agency, a legal system and National Assembly were based on this punitive approach.

The Korean society is highly-politicised partially due to the 60 years’ division of Korea into South and North. There was a long standing, sharp conflict on the nomination procedure of an inquiry team for this disaster. It indicates that the inquiry is influenced by many different agenda as shown in Elliott’s organisational learning process model (2009). These findings further support the idea that power and politics could form barriers that can prevent organisation learning taking place (Toft & Reynolds, 1997). These results provide further insight into how the Korean society can better respond to future disasters for more meaningful organisational learning.

Keywords: Sewol ferry disaster, organisational learning, cultural readjustment, public inquiry


