

Print ISSN: 0120-4645 / E-ISSN: 2256-5078 / Short name: cuad.adm. / Pages: 20-32  
Facultad de Ciencias de la Administración / Universidad del Valle / Cali - Colombia

## Care Ethics and Crisis Communication: Examining Two Experiences in South America

Ética del Cuidado y Comunicaciones en Crisis:  
Abordando Dos Experiencias en Suramérica

L'éthique des soins et des communications en situation de crise:  
deux expériences en Amérique du Sud

**Orlando Enrique Contreras-Pacheco\***

Associate Professor, School of Industrial Engineering and Business, Universidad Industrial de Santander, Bucaramanga, Colombia. e-mail: [ocotrerr@uis.edu.co](mailto:ocotrerr@uis.edu.co) ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3584-7063>

Article of Scientific and Technological Research,  
PUBLINDEX-COLCIENCIAS classification  
Submitted: 01/09/2018  
Reviewed: 09/10/2018  
Accepted: 16/10/2018

Core topic: Administration and Organizations  
JEL classification: D63, L29, M14, Q33

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25100/10.25100/cdea.2018v34n62.6866>

### Abstract

Framed by the normative dimension of the crisis communication literature, this study examines and compares the messages conveyed by two large companies in the South American extractive industry when dealing with catastrophic crises. By focusing on the application of the ethics of care principles, this study illustrates two divergent ways of conducting interpersonal relationships and benevolence as a virtue when communicating with stakeholders in the aftermath of two recent socio-environmental disasters involving human losses in Venezuela and Brazil. For this purpose, the offending companies' official responses obtained from various public sources are analyzed, both within and across the two cases, in light of a proposed outline of the theoretical framework at issue. The results show the contrasting ways in which these companies approached their stakeholders through crisis responses when referring to crisis casualties. Furthermore, the study compares the two cases' backgrounds and argues that the socio-political context influences the corporate decisions on crisis responses.

**Keywords:** Crisis communication, Crisis response, Ethics of care, South America.

### Resumen

Enmarcado en la dimensión normativa de la literatura sobre comunicaciones en crisis, el presente estudio examina y compara los mensajes transmitidos por dos grandes empresas pertenecientes a la industria extractiva en Suramérica durante momentos de crisis catastróficas. Al enfocarse en la aplicación de los principios de ética del cuidado, este estudio ilustra dos formas divergentes de conducir las relaciones con las personas y la benevolencia como una virtud al comunicarse con las partes interesadas luego de dos recientes desastres socio-ambientales que involucraron pérdidas humanas en Venezuela y Brasil. Para este propósito, las respuestas oficiales de las empresas infractoras, las cuales fueron obtenidas de diferentes fuentes públicas, se examinan tanto al interior como a través de los dos casos

\* Industrial Engineer, Universidad Industrial de Santander, Colombia, PhD (c) in Management, Rennes School of Business, Rennes, France.

a la luz de un esquema propuesto del marco teórico en cuestión. Los resultados muestran las formas contrastantes en que estas empresas se acercaron a sus partes interesadas a través de respuestas a las respectivas crisis en momentos específicos de referencia a víctimas humanas producidas. Además, el estudio compara los antecedentes de los dos casos y sostiene que el contexto sociopolítico influye en las decisiones corporativas sobre las respuestas a la crisis.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicaciones en crisis, Respuesta a crisis, Ética del cuidado, Suramérica.

### Résumé

Située dans la dimension normative de la documentation sur les communications en crise, cette étude examine et compare les messages véhiculés par deux grandes entreprises de l'industrie extractive en Amérique du Sud en période de crise catastrophique. En mettant l'accent sur l'application des principes de l'éthique des soins, cette étude illustre deux façons divergentes d'entretenir des relations avec les gens et la bienveillance comme vertu dans la communication avec les parties prenantes à la suite de deux récentes catastrophes socio-environnementales qui ont entraîné des pertes humaines au Venezuela et au Brésil. Dans ce but, les réponses officielles des sociétés en cause, qui ont été obtenues de différentes sources publiques, sont examinées à la fois en interne et dans les deux cas, à la lumière d'un schéma proposé pour le cadre théorique en question. Les résultats montrent la manière contrastée dont ces entreprises ont approché leurs parties prenantes à travers des réponses aux crises respectives à des moments spécifiques de référence aux pertes humaines produites. En outre, l'étude compare les antécédents des deux cas et soutient que le contexte sociopolitique influence les décisions des entreprises concernant les réponses à la crise.

**Mots clés:** Communication de crise, Réponse à la crise, Éthique des soins, Amérique du Sud.

## 1. Introduction

How should an Offending Company (OC) communicate with the public when handling a crisis? While a dominant dimension of the relevant literature advocates a more instrumental emphasis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Massey, 2001), the recent emergence of a more normative dimension has lately occupied an important academic space (Tao and Kim, 2017). In this sense, one can say that, in moments of crisis, an OC should engage in conveying transparent, proactive, and caring messages (Claeys, 2017; Kim, 2015; Xu and Li, 2013). For instance, expressing sympathy when

casualties have occurred is an opportunity to demonstrate care about them and/or the bereaved (Simola, 2003). However, although some OCs formally express agreement with this assertion and act accordingly, others, in fact, ignore this suggestion and instead focus on other priorities. Despite recent references to this normative conduct in the crisis communications body of knowledge described as care ethics (e.g. Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016; St. John III and Pearson, 2017), a better conceptualization of its meaning and exemplification of its functioning would help to provide a deeper understanding of its motivations and implications (Kim, Hwang and Zhang, 2017). This work argues that an appropriate scenario in which to evaluate this phenomenon is provided by sensitive contexts, such as the case of developing economies during tragic events.

The present study examines and compares the messages conveyed by two large companies in the extractive industry when dealing with catastrophic crises in South America. By focusing specifically on the application of the ethics of care guidelines in catastrophic crises, this study illustrates two divergent ways of conducting interpersonal relationships and benevolence as a virtue when communicating with stakeholders. Accordingly, the analysis contemplates the aftermath of two recent socio-environmental disasters involving human losses in Venezuela and Brazil.

Methodologically, the study examines, in a qualitative fashion, the two OCs' official response behaviors, which have been judged to be contrastive. The objective is to identify the antagonistic ways in which the two involved companies approached their stakeholders through crisis responses when addressing crisis casualties. In addition to highlighting the differences in two opposing care ethics approaches, this study provides evidence suggesting that the corresponding socio-political context might influence the corporate decisions regarding crisis responses in certain contexts.

This manuscript is organized as follows. The next two sections describe the theoretical antecedents in terms of the relevant topics. First, the background of the subject of organizational crises and the

normative dimension of crisis responses are briefly presented. Afterward, a more focused description of the care ethics framework in crisis communication is provided. In the following section, a summary of the methodology applied is presented, followed by a separate succinct account of each case. The subsequent section contains the results derived from the analysis of the cases. Finally, together with a conclusion, the last section includes a discussion of the results, limitations, and proposed future research directions.

## 2. Organizational Crises and the Normative Dimension of Crisis Responses

According to Coombs (2015a), an organizational crisis is usually understood as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an [OC]’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 3). Thus, in moments of crisis, it is expected that stakeholders will exert pressure on the involved company for the sake of defending their own interests (Benoit, 1997; Massey, 2001). The act of communicating during such events consists of a complex and dynamic structure of communicative practices, which unfolds before, during, and after a crisis (Johansen and Frandsen, 2007). In this sense, communicating in crises implies that an OC must equilibrate two different dimensions: the instrumental dimension and the normative dimension (Sandin, 2009; Xu and Li, 2013). While for the former dimension, crises are mostly handled to defend the OC’s interests through communication, for the latter dimension, crises imply for an OC the proper activation of communicational channels for the sake of preventing and/or protecting the public from any harm or threat deriving from the crisis (Coombs, 2010).

Taking a more specific look, a normative crisis response is meant to deal with the ethical implications that are present in any crisis through communication (Sandin, 2009; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000; Xu and Li, 2013). Ethical implications are frequently overlooked by OCs for several reasons, mostly linked to financial, legal, or reputational risks (Coombs, 2015b). Thus, contributing to

their examination is quite justified, because “too often, important ethical issues are ignored during the immediacy, uncertainty, and stress of a crisis” (Seeger and Ulmer, 2001, p. 375). As a consequence, although an important number of contributions have been presented in the relevant literature attending normative issues (Crijns, Claeys, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Eweje and Wu, 2010; Grebe, 2013; Kim, 2015; Xu and Li, 2013), there are still several opportunities for creating deeper knowledge on the subject. Particularly, some of the various concerns related to responsibility, fairness, trust, care, and justice in crisis responses should be addressed (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short and Coombs, 2017).

## 3. The Ethics of Care in Crisis Communications

In ethics, the adoption of a normative approach is mainly about what makes actions morally right or wrong. Specifically, in the business arena, several contributions have shaped its influence on management science and its subsequent evolution as a topic. One important study was directed towards the search for minimum common behaviors at every level of managerial decision (Cortina, 2008), and another placed a more specific emphasis on the way managers should convey their messages in order to act within proper and moral boundaries (i.e. Habermas’ theory of discourse ethics; García-Marzá, 2017; González-Esteban, 2007).

Concretely, performing an ethical action in a crisis means simply doing what is right for those affected by it (Simola, 2003). That is precisely why, in his theoretical reformulation, Coombs (2010) produced a synthesis of the ethical communication segment needed for handling a crisis. He implied that the normative dimension of a crisis response is composed of two different, but equally important categories, the first of which he called instructing and adjusting information, and the second, expressing sympathy for the victims. Despite their convenience and complementarity, the present study focuses exclusively on the latter category, specifically on crises causing casualties (which, for the purpose of this work, will be called “catastrophic crises”).

Originating from a gender equality controversy promoted by Gilligan (1982), the ethics of care is a normative approach, which, instead of focusing on justice as the ethical standard, it emphasizes the importance of the response. That is, its perspective is manifested by a modification in the moral query from “what is just” to “how to respond.” In detail, the ethics of care is centered on fostering relationships between people. It is a typical way of conducting interpersonal relationships and benevolence as a virtue when a difficult situation arises (Johnson, 2018). In addition, the ethics of care is somehow reflected in fear “about how to fulfill conflicting responsibilities to different people, as opposed to questions of how to resolve claims of conflicting rights among them” (Simola, 2003; p.354). In practice, handling a crisis following the care approach is based on assuming the obligations derived from the consequences of the crisis and trying to reconstruct relationships after its occurrence (Bauman, 2011). In addressing the care approach, Simola (2003) further proposed that expressing sympathy for crisis victims addresses moral concerns that involve fighting indifference and the feeling of not helping when one could help. In other words, when expressing care, an OC can accentuate the creation or reinforcement of links with its stakeholders and decrease the feelings of frustration (or sometimes guilt) that arise from being involved in a crisis. As such, this category can also be labeled as ‘care response’ (Coombs, 2010).

To sum up, expressing sympathy for victims within the ethics of care framework infers adopting an authentic deontological position –meaning that the intention behind a message is just as important as the message itself (Coombs and Holladay, 2014). This approach has even been evaluated as being as effective as instrumental approaches (Kim and Sung, 2014; Pangarkar, 2016). However, since measuring intentions is a cumbersome endeavor, the best way to perform such an assessment is based on proven and documented behaviors. Particularly, in the event of a catastrophic crisis, care ethics for an OC implies taking full responsibility for the crisis’s consequences (Coombs, Holladay and Claeys, 2016) and genuinely apologize for the pain caused (Koehn, 2013). Furthermore, it has been determined that, in such

situations, an OC should acknowledge the deceased victims, honoring their memories and understandably deploying a mechanism for supporting (mainly psychologically and financially) their families.

#### 4. Methodology

Following the work of Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki (2008), this study performs a case-comparison that illustrates two opposing discursive lines of the care ethics approach. The cases correspond to two catastrophic crises that occurred in South America in recent years in the extractive industry in Venezuela and Brazil respectively. First, the study examines the way in which the 47 lost lives attributable to a massive refinery explosion and blast that occurred in Venezuela in 2012 were addressed. Furthermore, it investigates the approach adopted towards the 19 lost lives caused by a dam collapse, which also resulted in an important amount of mining waste being released into a major Brazilian river in 2015.

More specifically, the messages conveyed by each OC when addressing the deceased victims of both cases are collected, interpreted, and compared. The data collection relies on documents that have been published and are available online. Furthermore, the study draws information from relevant news items and the OCs’ official corporate social media accounts. More than considering a demonstrative analysis, this work is explicative in nature, and centered on the associations between the theoretical underpinnings of the caring approach and what was actually communicated by both OCs in the aftermath of each corresponding crisis. Finally, the two cases are contrasted in order to highlight similarities and differences between their discursive lines.

To facilitate the understanding of the analysis, each case is briefly outlined below.

##### *Case 1. Refinery explosion and blast in Venezuela*

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is a resource-rich country and the typical example of a rentier market economy (Schneider, 2009). In fact, Venezuela’s subsoil holds the

world's largest proven crude oil reserves (Fantini and Quinn, 2017), a resource that is fully managed by the state-owned company, *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, which has been described as the economic arm of the socialistic government (Hults, 2012). Oil represents 96% of Venezuela's export earnings and 45% of its budget revenues (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016). Nevertheless, due to a disturbed political context, the country has been suffering the worst economic crisis in its history—the stagnation of its productive apparatus, the highest inflation rate worldwide (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016), and a severe scarcity of medicine and food (Alarcón, Álvarez and Hidalgo, 2016; Fraser, 2017). Both the government and the state-owned company are perceived as corrupt entities (Kaufmann, 2017; Quiroz, 2014; Transparency International, 2017) and have serious issues related to their societal and environmental transgressions (Amnesty International, 2016; Griffin, 2017).

*The event:* On August 25, 2012, at around 00:10 GMT, after a gas leak was detected, a gigantic explosion occurred at the facility of the PDVSA's Amuay refinery located in northwest Venezuela (Bhushan, Wehrstedt and Krebs, 2014). The shock waves caused widespread damage to nearby residential areas, along with multiple deaths. According to National Geographic (2017), this tragedy was the largest explosion of a refinery in the last 15 years and the deadliest corporate disaster in the Latin American oil and gas industry. After the explosion, a fire raged through other sectors of the facility, exacerbating the emergency. Nevertheless, according to a declaration by the state-owned company's CEO, the fire was already under control by the end of the first day, yet fire crews struggled for additional days to contain the blaze, which was finally extinguished on August 28 (Reuters, 2013). Ultimately, the damage included 47 deaths (including employees, members of the National Guard, and civilians), 135 injured, 3,403 houses damaged, and over USD 1.1 billion in financial losses (PDVSA, 2013a), as well as unquantifiable and officially unrecognized social and environmental damage (National Geographic, 2017).

In spite of the official efforts to single out the political opposition as the criminal author

of the disaster (PDVSA, 2013a), credible investigations revealed evident irregularities that confirmed the contrary. Indeed, a combination of managerial negligence, lack of maintenance due to budgetary shortcuts, and poor safety practices was established as the cause of the tragedy (Beaujon-Marín, and Leidenz-Font, 2012; Bhushan *et al.*, 2014; Sagrera, 2014; Wattie, 2014). However, neither PDVSA nor the Socialistic Venezuelan Government ever acknowledged such a conclusion.

## **Case 2. Dam collapse and toxic mud in Brazil**

As the world's most biodiverse country (Butler, 2016), the Federative Republic of Brazil is cataloged as an upper-middle income economy and a newly industrialized country. Companies that have a presence in its territory are mainly owned by either economic groups or multinational firms (Schneider, 2009). Although there is some ideological alternation in the country's power, their relationship with the Brazilian government generally reflects a typical capitalistic economy (i.e. while private subjects own economic resources and manage their use, the government acts as a regulator to ensure that there is a level playing field for companies). Mining, in turn, is one of the country's most representative industries, accounting for nearly US\$80,000 million per year. Particularly, Brazil has important reserves of essential metals such as bauxite, iron, niobium, nickel, and gold. Mineral products and mining account for 2% of Brazil's GDP (CEPAL, 2017).

*The event:* At 15:45 GMT on November 5, 2015, a huge tailings dam operated by Samarco, a 50/50 mining joint venture between BHP Billiton and Vale in the southeastern Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, collapsed. An oversized tidal wave of mining waste washed across the rural countryside of valleys, villages, and farmland, ruining hundreds of homes (Burritt and Christ, 2018). The devastation was massive. The magnitude of the damage was compared with the widely publicized cases of the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon oil spills (Ker, 2015). The incident killed 19 people, including members of one surrounding community, contractors,

**Table 1. Examples of care messages conveyed by both OCs in each corresponding crisis**

	Case 1: PDVSA	Case 2: Samarco
	<b>August 25, 2012 - by Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela:</b>	<b>November 5, 2015 (Day 6):</b>
<b>Crises' day zero</b>	"I want to convey to the relatives of those who died our deep pain and condolences (...). I have decided to decree three days of national mourning, because this affects us all, the great Venezuelan family (...) indeed, it is very regrettable, very painful" (Twitter, 2012).	(no report of casualties were acknowledged) (Facebook, 2015).
	<b>August 27, 2012 (Day 2) - by Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela:</b>	<b>November 11, 2015 (Day 6) - in a joint statement by Vale and BHP Billiton:</b>
<b>Between day 2 and day 30 (examples)</b>	President announces lifetime pension for wives of deceased soldiers and scholarships for their children (Twitter, 2012).	"On behalf of all employees of Vale and BHP Billiton we offer our solidarity to the relatives and friends of those who died as a result of this accident. We are deeply concerned about the well-being of employees and members of the local community who are still missing. Our thoughts are with you in this moment of sadness." (Vale, 2015).
	(no more mentions were made) (Twitter, 2012).	<b>November 19, 2015 (Day 14) - by Jac Nasser, BHP Billiton Chairman:</b> "We are deeply sorry for all those who have been impacted by this tragedy, in particular for the friends and families of those who died and those who are missing, as well as those who have lost their homes and feel uncertain about the future." (Facebook, 2015).
<b>Between 1 and 12 months (example)</b>	(no mentions were made) (Twitter, 2012).	<b>March, 2016 - In Corporate Newspaper:</b> Throughout January, each of the families of missing persons or fatal victims of the accident received BRL 100,000 in anticipation of compensation. Each of the 349 families who lost their homes received BRL 20,000, and fifty percent of this amount will not be considered as an anticipation of compensation. (Samarco, 2016b).
	<b>PDVSA's Sustainability Report 2012:</b>	<b>Samarco's Biennial Report (2015-2016):</b>
<b>Sustainability Report</b>	(no mentions were made) (PDVSA, 2013b).	"Samarco deeply regrets the deaths associated with the failure of the Fundão dam. Below are the names of the community members as well as Samarco employees and contractors who lost their lives on 05 November 2015. The feelings and prayers of each and every Samarco employee have been directed since that day to the families and friends of the victims (...)" (Samarco, 2017).
Source: Author Own elaboration.		

and some company employees (Samarco, 2016b). It also created toxic mud – a liquid mix of water, sands, and clays – that polluted an important river and left hundreds homeless, killing fish and aquatic life as it flowed down the river to the Atlantic Ocean more than 400 km downstream. In fact, an official report found that the toxin levels in the water

were 10 times above the legal limit and that thousands of people had lost their homes after the disaster (Reuters, 2015a). Of the confirmed deaths, at least two corresponded to children who were trying to run away from the affected area just after the mud had wiped out their entire school in the village of Bento Rodrigues (Barbara, 2015).

Beyond the causes of the failure, which were attributed to poor water risk management performance (Burritt and Christ, 2018), Samarco was condemned by public opinion for not being responsive at the moment of the accident. The company was accused of passivity when the accident took place and of failing to be clear about the enormous force with which the mud spread (ABC News, 2015). Furthermore, it was denounced for its explicit intention to downplay the consequences of the disaster by wrongly sustaining that the sludge produced was harmless, when in reality, it obviously was not (Reuters, 2015b).

## 5. Results and Discussion

An analysis of the messages concerned with the expression of sympathy in the care ethics dimension shows that the two OCs behaved in different and contrasting fashions. In the Venezuelan case (case 1), PDVSA started informing and conveying messages of consideration to the victims and their loved ones, but ultimately failed to provide a proper care response over the long run. Conversely, in the Brazilian case (case 2), Samarco did not demonstrate any responsibility and care for the victims at first, but after a time, it did express concern by paying tribute to the victims and expressing sympathy for those affected. See the examples in Table 1.

On the one hand, in the first case, although the early messages were meant to release the news about the explosion, in the following corporate communications, it was evident that the OC was focusing its efforts on conveying a political message aimed at defending its own image, attributing minor significance to the casualties. In any case, the acknowledgment of the victims killed in the incident took place the very same day the refinery exploded. Messages transmitted by the company on its Twitter account reported 39 deaths at the end of that day. Furthermore, together with condolences to the families of the victims, the president of the nation conveyed a message of compassion and consideration on the same day (Twitter 2012). Nevertheless, when addressing the consequences of the tragedy, no *mea culpa* or apology was expressed any member neither the government nor PDVSA (Bbc, 2012). In

the following days, with the exception of a few more mentions, especially about the National Guard members killed, no other reference to the casualties was made in the aftermath of the crisis. It seemed as if the company had adopted a new rhetorical style from that moment onwards: positive and optimistic rhetoric. From the second day, a nationalistic feeling of victory drove most of the messages conveyed in both the social and official news media. Apparently, everything was back under control, and both government and corporate posts displayed an image where no critical consequences would result from the incident. The fire's extinction on the fourth day was celebrated as if it was a magnificent achievement. Furthermore, after 17 days, it seemed as if nothing had happened at all. Both PDVSA and the Venezuelan government fell silent about the incident. Even the 2012 corporate sustainability report did not mention the event (PDVSA, 2013b). It was not until a year afterward that the official and definitive death toll of the tragedy (47), without the associated names, was quietly released through official channels (PDVSA, 2013a). In sum, the deceased victims of the Amuay refinery tragedy remain officially anonymous to date, and some of the missing have never been acknowledged (National Geographic, 2017).

In the second case, on the other hand, the results obtained are coincident with a company with no convincing intention to demonstrate much compassion during the immediate aftermath of the incident. In fact, Samarco and its corporate partners were highly criticized for initially reacting with an unassertive video message posted on its Facebook site and a short press release published the day after the tragedy (Phillips, 2015). At first, since the number of fatalities was unknown, it was apparently, more salient to handle other priorities than to acknowledge them. In fact, the company's first messages showed significant concern for the environmental implications of the tragedy, together with the prospective social rehabilitation of those affected, but again, nothing about the lost ones (Facebook, 2015). Nevertheless, as an unexpected turn, on the sixth day after the event, a joint press release between the two shareholding companies (Vale and BHP Billiton) explicitly expressed

**Table 2. Comparison of ethics of care approaches in the crisis responses**

Care ethics behaviors	Case 1: PDVSA	Case 2: Samarco
<b>Taking full responsibility for the crisis's consequences</b>	No. Despite the evidence, the company never accepted its guilt. Executives received support and protection from the Venezuelan government.	The company recognized its liability for the tragedy. However, instead of accepting human mistakes as the major causes of the failure, it demarcated the event as a mere "accident." The company was penalized and its executives are being prosecuted.
<b>Apologizing for the pain caused</b>	No. The company never apologized. No mention of the incident was made in the company's sustainability report.	Yes. The company's CEO apologized in his letter accompanying the corporate sustainability report.
<b>Acknowledging the deceased victims</b>	A partial death count was revealed on the same day as the incident. After one year, the company finally acknowledged the total death toll from the disaster.	The incident's death toll was released as time passed. A definitive death toll was official acknowledged a month afterwards.
<b>Honoring the deceased victims' memories</b>	National mourning for the victims was declared on the day of the explosion. However, the victims' names were never officially reported to the public. Therefore, no public tribute was offered to the victims' memories.	A tribute to the victims' memories was posted in the company's sustainability report.
<b>Deploying a mechanism for supporting the deceased victims' families</b>	Only the families of the members of the National Guard who were killed in the explosion's shockwave received compensation for their losses.	To compensate the victims, the company created a trust fund. The Fundação Renova delivered psychological and financial support to the deceased victims' families.

Source: Author Own elaboration.

a thoughtful regret for the deceased victims of the incident (Vale, 2015). In this way, on November 30, that is, 24 days after the tragedy, Samarco revealed that the death toll was 13, with six people still missing. The same figure rose to 17 after 23 additional days, with two people remaining missing. Finally, the official death toll reached 19, including one person presumed dead. It is worth mentioning that the families that lost their relatives in this tragedy received special care from the company after the confirmation of the victims' disappearance (Samarco, 2017). Through the Fundação Renova, and under the motto "repair, recover, rebuild," they received psychosocial support, financial aid for documentation and funerals, accommodations for people outside the region, and advance compensation on account of the death (Bhp, 2018). Furthermore, together with an explicit apology expressed by the company's CEO, a tribute to the memories of the deceased victims was posted on the first pages of the company's 2015-2016 biennial report (Samarco, 2017).

From a different perspective, each of the behaviors within the ethics of care framework is assessed for both cases. Additionally, a comparison of the two companies' approaches to their corresponding crisis is developed in light of those behaviors. These results are presented in Table 2.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to develop a better conceptualization of the care ethics framework in the crisis communication body of knowledge. To achieve this, the present study compared two contrasting approaches to handling catastrophic crises through communication. Specifically, it analyzed the ways in which two dissimilar OCs performed care ethics (Simola, 2003) when addressing the deceased victims of corresponding crises. The context examined was the extractive industry in South America and comprises two particular cases: a 2012 refinery explosion and blast in Venezuela and a 2015 dam collapse



and the resulting toxic mud in Brazil. In turn, the OCs involved were PDVSA, a large oil and gas socialistic state-owned company, and a giant transnational mining joint venture in Brazil, respectively. As the previous section demonstrated, the differences between the two approaches were evident and profound. In that order of ideas, this study suggests that although the geographical context of the two crises is similar, the behavior of both OCs in terms of the adoption of care ethics in their crisis communications was in fact quite dissimilar. After considering the background of each case, the author believes that the particular socio-political context in which a crisis occurs may influence corporate decisions regarding crisis responses.

In the former case, it was notable that once it became evident that the crisis represented a threat to its interests, PDVSA, the OC involved, practically changed its crisis communication screenplay. Therefore, its care ethics approach appears to be unfortunate and inconvenient insofar as minimized an ethical response to the crisis in favor of conveying politically charged messages of optimism regarding the fire's termination. Apparently, portraying an image of continuity just after the tragedy was more important than expressing sympathy for the deaths of the victims caused by its actions and decisions. Furthermore, the fact that the government backed the OC during the aftermath of the tragedy makes this case even more noteworthy. In fact, since PDVSA was consolidated as the economic sponsor of the country's socialistic agenda, every impact on its corporate image implied an impact on the image of the Venezuelan government as well. Because this government has been highly questioned in terms of its lack of perceived legitimacy, levels of corruption, and human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2016; Griffin, 2017; Kaufmann, 2017; Quiroz, 2014; Transparency International, 2017), the crisis at issue was managed under exceptional circumstances. In this sense, this study suggests that the institutional pressure (Benoit, 1997; Massey, 2001) experienced by the OC to convey messages properly in an ethical way after the incident was probably repressed by the Venezuelan government itself. Consequently, ratifying its full status of subservience (Hults, 2012), PDVSA's crisis communication strategy would had been

implemented according to governmental parameters and intentions, without any other considerations.

Conversely, the study observed a company (Samarco) acting strategically and mobilizing its communicational resources according to its own interests in the near aftermath of the incident. Its immediate response was actually catalogued as a chaotic response by public opinion and the media (Barbara, 2015; Phillips, 2015). Nevertheless, as the real magnitude of the tragedy was exposed, this study deduces that Samarco started to sense the pressure from its stakeholders and eventually acknowledged its responsibility for the consequences. The Brazilian Government experienced the pressure too, but, contrary to the Venezuelan Government, it held the company more accountable to Brazilian society. As a consequence, the OC's sympathetic attitude towards the deceased victims and their families seemed to improve systematically as time passed. This study can thus conclude that key stakeholders are able to boost a proper response by OCs under the ethics of care principles. However, the role of the government seemed to be essential for obtaining a positive result in this matter: probably not a fully authentic result but at least a tangible result. In the end, regardless of the destructive effects occurring as a result of Samarco's actions and decisions, and despite the multiple criticisms received from observers concerning its whole response, the evidence indicates that the company revealed some basic behaviors of engagement in the care ethics approach in this particular catastrophic scenario of crisis.

In addition to bringing up two cases that, to the best of the author's knowledge, have not been mentioned in the organizational research to date, both the theoretical and practical implications of this study comprise a more tangible understanding of the communicational normative dimension under specific circumstances. While certain components of the normative dimension of crisis communications, such as transparency, opportunity, and openness, have been addressed properly in previous research (e.g. Claeys, 2017; Grebe, 2013; Kim, 2015), others, more related to the so-called "care response" (Coombs, 2010), have not yet been fully developed. In this regard, following

Bauman (2011), Diers-Lawson and Pang (2016), Johnson (2018), Simola (2003), and St. John III and Pearson (2017) and utilizing the previous contributions of Coombs *et al.* (2016) and Koehn (2013), this study develops a preliminary and concise outline of the ethics of care framework in catastrophic crisis communication. Hence, it suggests that an ethical response at moments of catastrophic crisis includes messages that aim: i) to take full responsibility for the consequences of the crisis; ii) to apologize genuinely for the pain caused; iii) to acknowledge all of the deceased victims of the crisis; iv) to honor the deceased victims' memories; and v) to deploy a mechanism for supporting (mainly psychologically and financially) the deceased victims' families.

Despite the insights provided by this study, it also has some limitations. An evident limitation is its consideration of a two-case study; thus, it cannot be validated externally, even within the South American context. However, due to its explicative nature, it could be useful for further understanding the relations between OCs and their stakeholders in terms of the effect produced by the latter on the former (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, there is a need to consider the context to develop a better understanding of this relation. This study, for instance, could argue that the socio-political context is determinant in the molding of crisis responses in South America. In this sense, an interesting set of opportunities emerges to contrast and compare these results with other contexts and to obtain conclusive and generalizable knowledge. Additionally, attending to Bundy *et al.* (2017) and Tao and Kim (2017), this study suggests that the complementarity between the instrumental and normative approaches in the crisis communications literature remains to be examined in light of the validation of ethical responses as effective tools for defending instrumental interests. The analysis of perceptions, the performance measurement, and the emerging topic of organizational continuity are examples of how different options can help to create more and better contributions.

Finally, the author wishes to make clear that this study by no means pretends to justify and/or condemn any political and/or managerial system. The study does

not have the intention of denouncing or vindicating any of the presented corporate actions and decisions either. It acknowledges that both PDVSA as well as Samarco were responsible for producing indescribable levels of pain and recognizes that their corresponding societies are entitled to judge them accordingly, especially as both events have been determined to have been preventable (Bhushan *et al.*, 2014; Burritt and Christ, 2018). Therefore, the study is limited to an explicative, non-demonstrative academic assessment of specific behaviors that were publicly documented, and their understanding in light of a specific theoretical position. In this sense, both crises were analyzed through an academic lens, which noted a certain amount of reprehensible conduct together with assertive decisions vis-à-vis the particular framework at issue. Certainly, different results would be obtained in other scenarios of assessment, even within the business ethics body of knowledge.

## 7. References

- ABC News. (2015, November). *Brazil dam burst: Death toll from state's "worst environmental disaster" to rise, local mayor says* (November 7). Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-08/death-toll-from-collapsed-dams-in-brazil-to-rise-local-mayor/6921838>
- Alarcón, B., Álvarez, Á. E., & Hidalgo, M. (2016). Can Democracy Win in Venezuela? *Journal of Democracy*, 27(2), 20-34.
- Amnesty International. (2016, November). *Venezuela: Weakened Human Rights Commitments*. In *26<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Universal Periodic Review* (p. 9). Washington, USA. Amnesty International.
- Barbara, V. (2015, December). *Brazil's Toxic Sludge*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/17/opinion/brazils-toxic-sludge.html>
- Bauman, D. C. (2011). Evaluating Ethical Approaches to Crisis Leadership: Insights from Unintentional Harm Research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98(2), 281-295. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0549-3>
- JBBC News. (2012). *Huge blast stops Venezuela's main oil refinery Amuay*. *BBC*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19378657>

- Beaujon-Marín, A., & Leidenz-Font, J. P. (2012). *Amuay: Consecuencias de una gestión deficiente en la Industria Petrolera*. Caracas. Retrieved from <http://www.iesa.edu.ve/profesores-e-investigacion/centros-academicos/energia-y-ambiente>
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23(2), 177-186.
- Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2016). *BTI 2016 | Venezuela Country Report*. Retrieved from [https://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2016/pdf/BTI\\_2016\\_Venezuela.pdf](https://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2016/pdf/BTI_2016_Venezuela.pdf)
- BHP. (2018). *Supporting Samarco: Working to rebuild the local communities and restore the environment*. Retrieved from <https://www.bhp.com/media-and-insights/samarco?q0=1>
- Bhushan, K., Wehrstedt, K.-D., & Krebs, H. (2014). Amuay refinery disaster: The aftermaths and challenges ahead. *Fuel Processing Technology*, 119, 198-203. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.fuproc.2013.10.025>
- Bundy, J., Pfarrer, M. D., Short, C. E., & Coombs, W. T. (2017). Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development. *Journal of Management*, 43(6), 1661-1692. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316680030>
- Burritt, R. L., & Christ, K. L. (2018). Water risk in mining: Analysis of the Samarco dam failure. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 178, 196-205. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.01.042>
- Butler, R. A. (2016). *The top 10 most biodiverse countries*. Retrieved from <https://news.mongabay.com/2016/05/top-10-biodiverse-countries/>
- CEPAL. (2017). *Estudio Económico de América Latina y el Caribe (LC/PUB.2017/17-P)*. Santiago. Retrieved from [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/42001/159/S1700700\\_es.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/42001/159/S1700700_es.pdf)
- Claeys, A.-S. (2017). Better safe than sorry: Why organizations in crisis should never hesitate to steal thunder. *Business Horizons*, 60(3), 305-311. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2017.01.003>
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176. <http://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049>
- Coombs, W. T. (2010). Parameters for Crisis Communication. In W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (pp. 17-53). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Coombs, W. T. (2015a). *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding* (Fourth ed.). Thousand Oaks, USA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Coombs, W. T. (2015b). The value of communication during a crisis: Insights from strategic communication research. *Business Horizons*, 58(2), 141-148. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2014.10.003>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2014). *It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Coombs, W. T., Holladay, S. J., & Claeys, A.-S. (2016). Debunking the myth of denial's effectiveness in crisis communication: context matters. *Journal of Communication Management*, 20(4), 381-395. <http://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-06-2016-0042>
- Cortina, A. (2008). *Ética de la Empresa: Claves para Una Nueva Cultura Empresarial*. Madrid, España: Trotta Editorial.
- Crijns, H., Claeys, A.-S., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Who says what during crises? A study about the interplay between gender similarity with the spokesperson and crisis response strategy. *Journal of Business Research*, 79, 143-151. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.06.010>
- Diers-Lawson, A., & Pang, A. (2016). Did BP Atone for its Transgressions? Expanding Theory on "Ethical Apology" in Crisis Communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 24(3), 148-161. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12110>
- Eweje, G., & Wu, M. (2010). Corporate response to an ethical incident: the case of an energy company in New Zealand. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 19(4), 379-392.
- Facebook. (2015). *Samarco Mineração - Official Facebook Account*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/SamarcoMineracao/>
- Fantini, A. M., & Quinn, M. (2017). *OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin*. Retrieved from [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/static\\_files\\_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2017\\_13062017.pdf](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2017_13062017.pdf)
- Fraser, B. (2017). Data reveal state of Venezuelan health system. *The Lancet*, 389(10084), 2095. [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)31435-6](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)31435-6)
- García-Marzá, D. (2017). From Ethical Codes to Ethical Auditing: An Ethical Infrastructure for Social Responsibility Communication. *El Profesional de La Información*, 26(2), 1699-2407. <http://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2017.mar.13>

- Gibbert, M., Ruigrok, W., & Wicki, B. (2008). What Passes as a Rigorous Case Study? *Strategic Management Journal*, 29, 1465-1474. <http://doi.org/10.1002/smj.722>
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press.
- González-Esteban, E. (2007). La teoría de los stakeholders: Un puente para el desarrollo práctico de la ética empresarial y de la responsabilidad social corporativa. *Veritas*, II(17), 2015-224. <http://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009879312835>
- Grebe, S. K. (2013). Things can get worse: How mismanagement of a crisis response strategy can cause a secondary or double crisis: the example of the AWB corporate scandal. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 18(1), 70-86. <http://doi.org/10.1108/13563281311294137>
- Griffin, P. (2017). *The Carbon Majors Database: CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017*. Retrieved from <https://b8f65cb373b1b7b15feb-c70d8ead6ced550b4d987d7c03fcdd1d.ssl.cf3.rackcdn.com/cms/reports/documents/000/002/327/original/Carbon-Majors-Report-2017.pdf?1501833772>
- Hults, D. R. (2012). Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA): from independence to subservience. In D. G. Victor, D. R. Hults, & M. C. Thurber (Eds.), *Oil and Governance: State-Owned Enterprises and the World Energy Supply* (pp. 418-476). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Johansen, W., & Frandsen, F. (2007). *Krisekommunikation: Når virksomhedens image og omdømme er truet*. København, Danmark: Forlaget Samfundslitteratur.
- Johnson, C. E. (2018). *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*. Thousand Oaks, USA: SAGE Publications.
- Kaufmann, D. (2017). *2017 Resource Governance Index*. London, UK: The Natural Resource Governance Institute.
- Ker, P. (2015). *BHP Billiton has raised the death toll from the Samarco dam spill in Brazil*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/bhp-billiton-has-raised-the-death-toll-from-the-samarco-dam-spill-in-brazil-20151222-gltkbn.html>
- Kim, S., Hwang, J., & Zhang, X. (2017). The Impact of Organizations' Ethical Approaches in Times of Crisis. In B. R. Brunner (Ed.), *The Moral Compass of Public Relations* (p. 240). New York, USA: Routledge.
- Kim, S., & Sung, K. H. (2014). Revisiting the Effectiveness of Base Crisis Response Strategies in Comparison of Reputation Management Crisis Responses. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(1), 62-78. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2013.795867>
- Kim, Y. (2015). Toward an Ethical Model of Effective Crisis Communication. *Business and Society Review*, 120(1), 57-81.
- Koehn, D. (2013). Why Saying "I'm Sorry" Isn't Good Enough: The Ethics of Corporate Apologies. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 23(2), 239-268.
- Massey, J. E. (2001). Managing Organizational Legitimacy: Communication Strategies for Organizations in Crisis. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 38(2), 153-182.
- National Geographic. (2017). *La mayor explosión en una refinería de los últimos 15 años*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalgeographic.es/medio-ambiente/la-mayor-explosion-en-una-refineria-de-los-ultimos-15-anos>
- Pangarkar, N. (2016). A framework for effective crisis response. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 29(4), 464-483.
- PDVSA. (2013a). *Evento Clase A - Refinería de Amuay*. Caracas. Retrieved from <http://www.pdvs.com/index.php?id=135&lang=es>
- PDVSA. (2013b). *Balance de la Gestión Social y Ambiental 2012*. Caracas, Venezuela: Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.
- Phillips, D. (2015). Brazil's mining tragedy: was it a preventable disaster? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/nov/25/brazils-mining-tragedy-dam-preventable-disaster-samarco-vale-bhp-billiton>
- Quiroz, J. C. (2014). Measuring up to Transparency and Accountability Standards: Challenges and Opportunities for Effective Governance. In J. Cruz-Vieyra, & M. Masson (Eds.), *Transparent Governance in an Age of Abundance: Experiences from the Extractive Industries in Latin America and the Caribbean* (pp. 39-76). Washington, USA: Inter-American Development Bank.
- Reuters. (2013). Chronology: Pump collapse, leak caused Venezuela refinery blast. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-venezuela-refinery/chronology-pump-collapse-leak-caused-venezuela-refinery-blast-idUSBRE9880Z820130909>

- Reuters. (2015a). Mud from Brazil dam burst is toxic, U.N. says. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-damburst-mud/mud-from-brazil-dam-burst-is-toxic-u-n-says-idUSKBN0TE2O520151126>
- Reuters. (2015b). Mud from Brazil dam burst is toxic, U.N. says. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-damburst-mud/mud-from-brazil-dam-burst-is-toxic-u-n-says-idUSKBN0TE2O520151126>
- Sagrera, C. (2014). New Challenge in Latin American and Caribbean Oil Spill Control: Offshore Prevention and Response after the DWH Milestone. In *2014 International Oil Spill Conference Proceedings* (pp. 1-13). Savannah, USA: American Petroleum Institute & Allen Press, Inc.
- Samarco. (2016a). *Understand the collapse*. Retrieved from <http://www.samarco.com/en/rompimento-de-fundao/>
- Samarco. (2016b). *Samarco Update (#4)*. Retrieved from <https://www.samarco.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Issue-4-1.pdf>
- Samarco. (2017). *Biennial Report 2015-2016*. Belo Horizonte, Brasil: GRI Consultancy.
- Sandin, P. (2009). Approaches to Ethics for Corporate Crisis Management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 87, 109-116. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9873-2>
- Schneider, B. R. (2009). Hierarchical Market Economies and Varieties of Capitalism in Latin America. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 41(3), 553-575. <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X09990186>
- Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2001). Virtuous Responses to Organizational Crisis: Aaron Feuerstein and Milt Cole. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 31(4), 369-376.
- Simola, S. (2003). Ethics of Justice and Care in Corporate Crisis Management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 46(4), 351-361.
- St. John III, B., & Pearson, Y. E. (2017). *Crisis Communication & Crisis Management: An Ethical Approach*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Tao, W., & Kim, S. (2017). Application of two under-researched typologies in crisis communication: Ethics of justice vs. care and public relations vs. legal strategies. *Public Relations Review*, 43(4), 690-699. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.06.003>
- Transparency International. (2017). *Corruption Perception Index 2016 - Venezuela (Country Profile)*. Retrieved from <https://www.transparency.org/country/VEN>
- Twitter. (2012). *@pdvsa: Cuenta Oficial de Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/pdvsa?lang=es>
- Ulmer, R. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (2000). Consistent Questions of Ambiguity in Organizational Crisis Communication: Jack in the Box as a Case Study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 25(2), 143-155.
- Vale. (2015). *Press Release: Comunicado conjunto de Vale e BHP Billiton*. Retrieved from <http://www.vale.com/brasil/PT/aboutvale/news/Paginas/comunicado-conjunto-vale-bhp-billiton.aspx>
- Wattie, J. (2014). Reducing Latent Failure and Securing Productivity in High Risk Systems Using High Reliability Theory. In *SPE Biennial Energy Resources Conference* (p. SPE-169932-MS). Port of Spain, España: Society of Petroleum Engineers.
- Xu, K., & Li, W. (2013). An Ethical Stakeholder Approach to Crisis Communication: A Case Study of Foxconn's 2010 Employee Suicide Crisis. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 117, 371-386. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1522-0>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, USA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

### ¿How to quote this article?

Contreras-Pacheco, O. E. (2018). Care Ethics and Crisis Communication: Examining Two Experiences in South America. *Cuadernos de Administración*, 34(62), 20-32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25100/10.25100/cdea.2018v34n62.6866>