Learning from crisis: The role of enquiry commissions

Helge Renå1 | Johan Christensen2

1Department of Administration and Organization Theory, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway
2Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, Den Haag, The Netherlands

Correspondence
Helge Renå, Department of Administration and Organization Theory, University of Bergen, Serviceboks 7800, 5020 Bergen, Norway.
Email: helge.rena@uib.no

Abstract
The literature on crisis learning has thus far paid little attention to the institutional channels through which governments draw lessons from crisis events. This paper examines theoretically and empirically a key institutional site for crisis learning: enquiry commissions. The theoretical argument is illustrated by analysing the enquiry commission that examined the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway. The paper argues that the work of enquiry commissions exhibits tensions that condition the subsequent opportunities of government to learn from crisis. The paper shows how the lessons drawn by the commission investigating the attacks were shaped by the commission's dual function, by the dominant professional perspectives within the group, and by the specific models of decision-making and assessment standards that the commission adopted.

KEYWORDS
Crisis learning, crisis management, enquiry commissions, organizational learning

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of major crises such as terrorist attacks, large accidents and natural disasters, governments face a demand for answers and accountability (Boin, Stern, ’t Hart, & Sundelius, 2016; Hood, 2002). What went wrong? Who should be held to account? Could the crisis or its worst consequences have been prevented? And how can we protect ourselves against similar events in the future? While governments can certainly learn from crisis, there is a consensus in the literature that drawing appropriate lessons from crisis events is hard (Boin et al., 2016; Dekker & Hansén, 2004). Various reasons have been identified: Crises offer few previous examples to draw from; the major consequences of crisis make trial and error learning prohibitive; and the political and organizational dynamics of the post-crisis phase may result in erroneous lessons learned (Boin & ’t Hart, 2003; Moynihan, 2008).

Less attention has been paid to the specific institutional channels through which government learns from crisis. Enquiry commissions have been used to investigate major terrorist attacks such as “9/11,” natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, socio-technological accidents like the Fukushima Nuclear accident and pandemics like the swine flu. Existing literature indicates that enquiry commissions are important venues for crisis accountability and learning (Boin et al., 2016; Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Broekema, 2016). Yet, studies have so far focused mainly on the political dynamics surrounding the appointment of commissions and the reception of their advice (Boin et al., 2016). Research on crisis management has said less about enquiry commissions themselves and how they filter information and orient lesson-drawing. This paper attempts to fill this gap by exploring the following question: How do the tensions inherent to the work of enquiry commissions condition the subsequent opportunities of government to learn from crisis?

The argument of the paper is that enquiry commissions face a set of generic tensions in their work that affect their analysis and recommendations and therefore condition the lessons government might draw from crisis. Drawing on classic insights from organizational and institutional theory, we identify four tensions. The first and overarching tension concerns the function of enquiry commissions in
relation to the broader environment it exists and operates in, which is both instrumental and symbolic. The three other tensions concern the relation between the commission and its field of study, that is, how commissions as institutions assess and interpret information about crisis events.

The theoretical argument is illustrated by analysing the independent enquiry commission that examined the terrorist attacks in Norway on 22 July 2011, one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the Western world in the last decade. The scale of the crisis and the political and societal significance of the enquiry make this a suitable case for elucidating empirically how the generic tensions enquiry commissions face can come into play in practice. The empirical analysis examines the appointment and composition of the commission and the reasoning and conclusion in its report.

The paper contributes to the literature on crisis management by highlighting how the institutions through which government processes crisis experiences are far from neutral mechanisms for learning; rather, they filter information in particular ways and orient lesson-drawing in specific directions. We develop a novel framework for understanding enquiry commissions derived from the sociological literature on organizations and institutions. The set of tensions that we outline can be applied in the study of post-crisis enquiry commissions more generally. The sociological institutional perspective points towards dynamics that are not fully accounted for in existing work, which has focussed on cognitive, organizational and political factors as determinants of learning from crisis.

The argument also has practical implications: Awareness about the fundamental challenges facing enquiry work may help practitioners avoid some major pitfalls and reduce the risk of erroneous learning from crisis.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first survey the literature on learning from crisis and existing work on the role of enquiry commissions in this process. We then develop a theoretical argument about four tensions faced by enquiry commissions. These tensions are elucidated empirically with the case of the 22 July Commission. We conclude by discussing broader implications for the question of how government learns from crisis.

2 | LEARNING FROM CRISIS

In the aftermath of crisis, an important task for public authorities is to draw lessons from what happened in order to prevent similar events in future. Learning from crisis can be understood as “determining the causes of a crisis, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the responses to it and undertaking remedial action based on this understanding” (Boin et al., 2016: 15).

The type of learning we focus on is governmental lesson-drawing: what lessons does government draw about the causes of crisis (what went wrong and why), the effects and adequacy of the response and the appropriate measures to prevent future crises? This excludes questions of subsequent policy implementation, policy change or reform, which are sometimes subsumed under the concept of learning (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Birkland, 1997). Moreover, we are interested in how central governments learn from crisis rather than how single organizations, units or teams learn. Finally, we are interested in the lessons that are drawn after a crisis event, which can be distinguished from learning in crisis, that is the experience-based learning that takes place during a single crisis episode (Moynihan, 2009).

Why it is so hard for governments to learn from crisis has been at the centre of scholarly attention (Boin et al., 2016; Dekker & Hansén, 2004; Moynihan, 2008). Existing research has identified a variety of constraining factors, including cognitive, political and organizational factors (Moynihan, 2008; Smith & Elliott, 2007). Since crises are characterized by low probability/high consequence events, history offers meagre samples of experience to draw from. Moreover, “the high consequentiality of crises makes trial and error learning prohibitive” (Moynihan, 2008: 351). Few opportunities to develop relevant capacities, combined with the tendency of individuals and organizations to reproduce well-learned responses to new threats, often result in inappropriate responses (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981).

Political dynamics also come into play after a crisis. First, different stakeholders try to agree on what went wrong (and not), and who, if anyone, is to be held accountable for the detected failures. To reduce the likelihood of being subject to any “blame-games” (Hood, 2002), stakeholders often put much effort into how the crisis response is framed (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; Edelman, 1977). Second, crises function as “focusing events” (Birkland, 1997; Kingdon, 1984) where policy-makers may see the crisis as a window of opportunity to promote policy ideas they want to implement, regardless of whether it is in fact an adequate response to the causes of the crisis. These political dynamics, and organizations’ struggle for survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), give rise to bargaining and potentially suboptimal decisions which may result in erroneous lesson-drawing (Boin & ’t Hart, 2003; Moynihan, 2008).

However, less attention has been paid to the specific institutional channels for learning, such as enquiry commissions, hearings or internal evaluations (but see Stark, 2018). Enquiry commissions—understood here as temporary bodies set up by political authorities after a crisis to assess crisis preparedness and response—are one of the principal tools of governments for drawing lessons from crisis. It should be emphasized that we do not believe there is a one-to-one relation between the conclusions and policy recommendations made by enquiry commissions and the actual crisis learning by governments. What we do assume is that governmental crisis learning can be conditioned by enquiry commissions, which resonates with observations made in the existing literature.

Boin and colleagues point to independent enquiry commissions as key venues for crisis accountability and learning, observing that “publicly investigating and rendering account of a crisis is an essential but delicate act of moving from crisis to a new normalcy” (Boin et al., 2016: 19; see also Broekema, 2016). They discuss how public leaders deal with these bodies. Given that the conclusions of enquiry commissions can be damning to incumbents, political leaders may seek to steer or neutralize such bodies. Governments may try to avoid appointing an enquiry commission in the first place, restrict
the terms of reference of the investigation or hand-pick commission chairs or members who are sympathetic to the government. Yet, these scholars mainly discuss enquiry commissions from the perspective of the government and not from the perspective of the commission itself.

Another line of research has studied crisis-investigating commissions through the lens of sense-making (Gephart, 1984). However, these studies have primarily focused on the events described rather than the reports enquiry commissions produce (Brown, 2004). Two exceptions are Brown (2004) and Boudes and Laroche (2009), which take the enquiry report as their unit of analysis. Brown (2004) presents illustrating examples of “ways in which the sense-making efforts of enquiry teams are represented in text as authoritative” (Brown, 2004: 109). Boudes and Laroche show how post-crisis reports select some events while ignoring others and cast actors and attribute responsibilities according to basic plots. They observe some tensions in the role of enquiry commissions, such as the issue of predictability (whether the commission construes the crisis as predictable) and whether blame is attributed to individual and/or organizational factors. However, they do not link their analysis to the issue of learning, but argue that this is an important avenue for further research (Boudes & Laroche, 2009).

To conclude, existing crisis management literature acknowledges that enquiry commissions can play a significant role for crisis accountability and learning. However, the challenges confronting enquiry commissions as mechanisms for crisis-induced learning by governments have not been systematically addressed. We attempt to fill this gap by identifying a set of tensions present in crisis-investigating commissions that may condition what government learns from crisis.

3 | ENQUIRY COMMISSIONS AND LEARNING FROM CRISIS

Our theoretical starting point is the sociological literature on organizations and institutions. This literature centres on the institutional aspects of organizations: how organizations work is not only a function of formal characteristics but also of informal features (e.g., values and ideas) and organizations’ relationship to their environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Davis, 2007). We argue that enquiry commissions can be understood as institutions whose work is affected by specific institutional dynamics. From the perspective of sociological institutional theory, the overarching tension confronting enquiry commissions in relation to their environment is what function they serve. Moreover, sociological institutional theory points towards specific tensions concerning how commissions relate to their field of study, that is, how commissions assess and interpret information about crisis events. We identify three tensions, which concern commissions’ epistemic basis, their understanding of organizational decision-making and their standards of assessment. From the perspective of sociological theory on organizations and institutions, we believe these four tensions capture the fundamental challenges confronting enquiry commissions as institutions for learning from crisis. As we argue in the following, how commissions handle these tensions can condition what lessons government draws from crisis events.

3.1 | Function: Instrumental versus symbolic

A first tension faced by enquiry commissions is their double function. On the one hand, commissions may be set up based on a genuine need to understand the crisis events and account for what went wrong, so that similar events can be averted in the future. This can be referred to as the instrumental function of commissions. This is in line with a rational or instrumental perspective on organizations, which emphasizes the formal goals of organizations and how organizational structures are consciously designed to achieve these goals (Scott & Davis, 2007). Seen from this perspective, enquiry commissions are carefully designed instruments for achieving the official goal of accounting for the crisis and crisis response. Commissions are part of a rational learning process, where inquiries lead to policy changes that make government better prepared to address the next crisis.

Yet, enquiry commissions also have a symbolic function (Ashforth, 1990). In the wake of major crises, the need to reassure the population and ensure societal cohesion is strong. Appointing an enquiry commission can be a way to signal that the authorities take the event seriously and are committed to preventing similar events, to forge a common understanding of the crisis and to restore confidence in government (Parker & Dekker, 2008). It can also be a way to defuse or postpone the political conflicts raised by a crisis. The sheer fact of setting up an investigative commission may therefore be as important as the content of the investigation. This is in line with a symbolic or ceremonial perspective on organizations, which sees organizational structures as a reflection of expectations and norms in the environment. Organizations need to conform to these “myths” in order to be seen as legitimate, which leads them to adopt particular structures in a ceremonial way (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Enquiry commissions can thus be seen as a ceremonial answer to expectations about government action and accountability after crisis, aimed at ensuring the legitimacy of the political order.

These two functions may be compatible. Commissions that lack relevant competences or the independence to carry out a proper enquiry will likely have limited symbolic value. And the symbolic importance of enquiry commissions may entail generous resources (e.g., funding, access to evidence) that strengthen their ability to carry out their instrumental function (see Parker & Dekker, 2008). Yet, there are also tensions between the two functions, which may affect the ability of government to learn from crisis. First, the symbolic qualities required to lead or be part of an enquiry commission may not be the same as the qualities required to analyse the crisis response. Second, the importance of forging a common understanding of the crisis may stand in the way of divisive but more accurate conclusions. Third, the fact of proposing reforms to prevent similar events in the future may be more important than whether these are actually appropriate policy changes to improve crisis preparedness.
3.2 | Epistemic basis: Competing professional and disciplinary perspectives

A second tension facing enquiry commissions relates to the expert knowledge used to analyse crisis events. The growing complexity and uncertainty of modern society has made advanced specialized knowledge indispensable for analysing societal issues (Haas, 1992). At the same time, crises have become increasingly "transboundary" in nature (Ansell, Boin, & Keller, 2010). Examples are complex terrorist attacks like “9/11” or large-scale natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami in South-East Asia. The transboundary character of crises not only means that problems cut across policy areas and agency boundaries; it also implies that problems span different professional and disciplinary fields. For instance, modern Islamic terrorism has political, social, religious and technological aspects. Analysing this phenomenon thus involves experts from fields such as religious studies, political science, criminology, policing, intelligence and IT.

Different professions and disciplines rely on distinct perspectives and models for understanding the social world. These perspectives highlight certain aspects of a problem and focus the attention on specific actor motivations. An example is the focus in economic models on self-interested behaviour and the incentive structures faced by actors (Schlefer, 2012). Yet, this also means that professional and disciplinary perspectives have “blind spots”: by focusing on one aspect of a problem complex, other aspects are neglected. The implication is that the type of expert knowledge employed by an enquiry commission shapes its analysis of the crisis. The professional and disciplinary composition of a commission and the kind of analytical capacities at its disposal not only influence how the causes of crisis and determinants of the crisis response are understood, but also what are seen as appropriate remedies. By shaping the commission’s interpretation of the crisis, the epistemic basis of the commission can influence what lessons government draws from the crisis.

3.3 | Models of decision-making in organizations

Another tension faced by enquiry commissions concerns how they understand organizational decision-making. Decisions taken by individuals operating within organizational settings are at the centre of any crisis, both in preventing crises and in mitigating their impact. Examples are the decisions of agency directors on what resources to deploy to avert a crisis, or the decisions of front-line police officers during a crisis situation. Analysing and explaining such processes involve choosing analytical perspectives, explanatory models and theoretical frameworks. These choices may be linked to the kind of professional and disciplinary perspectives that dominate within a commission (see previous section).

First, how enquiry commissions perceive rationality has implications for what issues are regarded as salient. If one regards decision-makers primarily as calculating and utility-maximizing individuals, this implies a focus on preferences, cognitive capacity and information processing, and on how these influence individual and organizational decision-making (March & Simon, 1993). By contrast, if one perceives decision-makers primarily as rule-following members of a collective, this implies a focus on identity, roles and social positions, and on how these influence and frame people’s interpretation of the situation they are in (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; March & Olsen, 1989).

Second, enquiry commissions are bound to focus more on some organizational and institutional factors than others, and on particular analytical levels. For instance, do they give primacy to formal structures like organizational charts, the hierarchical division of position and rank and standard operating procedures or rather to informal structures like norms, custom and organizational cultures? Moreover, do they focus on the individuals within the organization or on macro-level factors such as how the organization is influenced by broader norms in its environment?

Third, how enquiry commissions balance individual- and system-oriented explanations is likely to affect their diagnosis and prescription. Some scholars argue that accidents are inevitable because organizations grow increasingly dependent on technologies characterized by interactive complexity and tight coupling (Perrow, 1999). Commissions adhering to this view are likely to focus on detecting technical errors and malfunctioning systems, while commissions adhering to perspectives emphasizing the role of management and leadership (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011) are likely to focus on whose individual actions were wrong/inadequate and whose were right/adequate. Thus, the perspectives, models and frameworks implicitly or explicitly adopted by the commission have implications for which lessons are drawn from the crisis.

3.4 | Assessment standards

A fourth tension faced by enquiry commissions relates to the assessment of the adequacy of crisis preparedness and response. Evaluating whether relevant authorities were sufficiently prepared for the crisis and whether their response was adequate often lies at the centre of inquiries. The former involves evaluating whether plans and procedures were appropriate, whether actors had the necessary resources to prevent the crisis, and whether they had sufficient competence to detect and prevent the crisis. The latter involves examining whether plans and procedures were followed, and whether the actors had adequate resources and competences to respond to the crisis.

However, these assessments depend fundamentally on how the enquiry commission judges the nature of the incident itself, that is, its predictability (Boudes & Laroche, 2009)—whether the incidents are deemed imaginable or lie beyond what one could expect, so-called “unknown unknowns.” If a crisis is impossible to imagine, there are no real grounds for criticizing actors for not having included such a scenario in their contingency plans or prepared for such an incident. Neglecting the nature of the crisis therefore increases the risk of judging crisis preparedness according to unrealistic standards and of drawing the wrong lessons from the crisis.

Moreover, the assessment of how actors responded to a crisis will depend on what information the actors had at the time of the
incident. Looking back at crises, we have a tendency to judge the actions based on retrospective reasoning (Vaughan, 1999), also known as hindsight bias. Failing to take into account what actors knew at the time may lead commissions to draw erroneous conclusions about the actions taken in response to crisis, which subsequently may lead to erroneous “lessons learned.” What weight to attribute to the effects of actions constitutes an additional challenge. If enquiry commissions do not consider the positive or negative effects of actions in their assessments, this could jeopardize the legitimacy of the commission with the general public. Yet, if commissions base their assessments solely on what effects the actions had, they run the risk of drawing conclusions that disregard the extremeness of the crisis situation. Importantly, the standards of assessment chosen by a commission may be linked to its understanding of decision-making in organizations (see previous section).

Finally, the four tensions may also interact in shaping what lessons are drawn from crisis. Most notably, the symbolic function of enquiry commissions may heighten the risk of drawing erroneous lessons from crisis due to blind spots in disciplinary understandings, misjudging the predictability of the crisis, or hindsight bias. The combination of the symbolic pressure to propose reforms to prevent future crises and the considerable risks of misjudging the causes or preventability of crises increases the chance that government will base policy on faulty lessons.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

We elucidate our theoretical argument with an analysis of how the four tensions played out in the case of the 22 July Commission, an independent commission set up by the Norwegian government to investigate the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011. The case study functions as an instrument to illustrate how the four tensions manifest themselves empirically (cf. Thomas, 2011). We analyse qualitatively the terms of reference of the commission, its composition (including biographical data on its members), the report itself (i.e., the reasoning and conclusions contained in the report) and political statements about the commission. We also draw on existing research commentary about the commission. The analysis is based on publically available sources and can be verified by other researchers.

The authors of this article do not have personal connections to the empirical subject matter. However, we are both scholars from the field of political science and public administration, which necessarily shapes our perspective on the crisis and the commission.

5 | THE 22 JULY COMMISSION

On 22 July 2011, Norway experienced the most serious terrorist attacks in modern history. The right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik first detonated a bomb inside the government complex in Oslo and two hours later carried out a shooting massacre at a Labour Party youth camp on the island of Utøya. A total of 77 people were killed in the attacks.

The Labour-led government—in consultation with the opposition—quickly appointed an enquiry commission to investigate the attacks. In Norway, there is a long tradition of relying on temporary commissions to examine major policy issues and crisis events (Christensen & Holst, 2017). The 22 July Commission was given this official status. Its terms of reference stated that the aim was to “carry out a review and evaluation to draw lessons from the events, with the goal of making Norwegian society as well prepared as possible to prevent and respond to possible attacks in the future” (NOU, 2012, p. 38). In other words, learning from the crisis was a central and explicit objective of the commission. The terms of reference also explicitly stated that the commission was independent from Cabinet and the Prime Minister’s Office. The commission was given extensive resources and access to involved actors and documentation. The entire report from the commission was made public, as is the tradition with official enquiry reports in Norway.

5.1 | Function

The tension between an instrumental and a symbolic function was evident in the appointment of the 22 July Commission. After the most serious act of violence in modern Norwegian history, there was a pressing need to understand what had caused and permitted such an attack (Holst, 2016). The commission was in part designed to fulfil this instrumental function: it was asked to provide a factual account of events, to assess the preparations and response of government and to propose measures to improve the preparedness for crisis. It was also given the resources, access and independence to carry out a thorough investigation (NOU, 2012).

Yet, the commission also had a highly symbolic role. Few had anticipated a major terrorist attack on Norwegian soil, and the violence and political motivation of the attacks had rocked Norwegian society. Re-establishing a feeling of security among the population and ensuring political and societal cohesion was paramount. Moreover, the perception of a flawed government response generated expectations about government action and accountability (Christensen, Lægreid, & Rykkja, 2013). This symbolic aspect was apparent in the statements from political leaders. Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg asked the commission to deliver an “honest and unembellished” account of events that could generate “a shared understanding” of what happened, and later commended the commission for creating “a shared narrative” of what went wrong (Lode, 2011).

What may be seen as one expression of this symbolic role was the government’s emphasis on setting up a commission without participation from the public authorities, which are usually represented in Norwegian official commissions (Christensen & Holst, 2017). One could object that relying solely on outside expertise was necessary for the commission to perform its instrumental function, by ensuring independence from the interests of cabinet or government agencies. However, it also deprived the commission of valuable administrative
knowledge about how the main government institutions in the area of security and justice worked. This may be seen as something that weakened its ability to draw relevant conclusions from the crisis.

The 22 July Commission’s proposals for reform may also be seen as a reflection of its symbolic role. Asked to propose measures to enhance crisis preparedness, the commission recommended a set of changes centred on strengthening culture and leadership in the government bureaucracy. Its main recommendation was that “managers at all levels of the public administration systematically work to strengthen their own and their organizations’ fundamental attitudes and culture related to the recognition of risk, the ability to execute decisions, coordination, the use of ICT and result-oriented leadership” (NOU, 2012: 458). The problem with this recommendation was twofold. First, it lacked a solid empirical basis. The commission uncovered a series of flaws in the government’s preparation for and response to the attacks, but presented scant evidence that these flaws were actually related to administrative culture and leadership rather than to other factors (cf. Høyer, Madsbu, & Tranøy, 2018).

In other words, there was a disconnection between the analysis of events and the reform proposals. Second, the recommendation was rather vague. The idea of improving culture and leadership in public organizations was certainly appealing and difficult to disagree with. Yet, what kind of concrete changes were necessary and how one might assess progress along these dimensions was difficult to grasp.

5.2 | Epistemic basis

Like other commissions investigating complex crisis events, the 22 July Commission relied heavily on expert knowledge. Not only were most commission and secretariat members highly educated professionals or academics; the commission also commissioned analyses and expert assessments and met with academics (NOU, 2012). Yet, certain types of expert knowledge were more important than others. Most striking was the dominance of legal expertise. The commission leader was a lawyer with both Norwegian and international degrees, and nearly half of the members of the commission and its secretariat had a legal background. Legal expertise partly overlapped with a police background: Three of the ten commission members (including the two foreign members) came from the police. Moreover, central commission and secretariat members had experience from the corporate world.

Other disciplines were also present, including history and political science. Yet, some relevant specific types of expertise were missing. Given the commission’s task of assessing crisis management in public organizations, the absence of public administration or organizational scholars on the commission was notable. The two political scientists in the commission and the secretariat had worked on international terrorism and the EU, respectively. Although the commission possessed extensive knowledge about specific organizations, such as the police, it had limited expertise on the organization of the public sector more generally. The commissioned expert analyses did not address the administrative and organizational aspects of crisis management to any significant degree either.

The professional and disciplinary composition of the commission appears to have shaped its analysis and conclusions (Christensen, 2013). A legal approach was recognizable in the commission’s assessment of how different agencies dealt with crisis. It put great emphasis on formal responsibilities, rules and plans and assessed organizational performance against the formally adopted standards for security and crisis preparedness (NOU, 2012). The business perspective may be recognized in the commission’s strong belief in leadership: The failures of public organizations prior to and during the attacks were frequently ascribed to a lack of leadership. The view underlying much of the commission’s analysis was that leaders have great influence on how organizations work, with the ability to change the basic attitudes and culture within the organization. At the same time, the commission neglected other potential organizational dynamics underlying the crisis response of public agencies, for instance related to organizational structures or standard operating procedures (discussed further below; Christensen, 2013; Fimreite, Lango, Laegreid, & Rykkja, 2014). This might be seen as a reflection of its lack of expertise from public administration or organizational science. The professional profile of the commission thus appears to have led it to highlight certain aspects of the failed response to the terrorist attacks while overlooking others.

5.3 | Models of decision-making in organizations

Large parts of the 22 July Commission’s report concerned decision-making within organizations, from the administrative decisions about security at the government complex to the operational decisions of police officers during the terrorist attacks. In its conclusions, the commission expressed its basic understanding of what factors influenced organizational decision-making:

“We have seen few examples of formal organization being a constraining factor’ [...] ‘What fundamentally distinguished what went well from what went wrong on July 22 was primarily related to attitudes, culture and leadership, and how people and organizations executed the authority they were delegated’.( NOU 2012: 456, 458, original emphasis)

Yet, this conclusion was challenged by much of the evidence presented in the report, which suggested that formal organizational structures had indeed played an important role. Fimreite et al. (2014) criticized the commission for employing a too narrow perspective on organizations, not recognizing that the problems related to culture, leadership and execution cannot be understood independently of formal organization. For instance, the commission did not link the observed problem of coordination across ministries to the highly specialized structure of the Norwegian government bureaucracy.

Another blind spot in the commission’s view of organizations concerned routines and standard operating procedures. Much of the organizational behaviour described in the report—for example the failure to implement security measures at the government complex.
or the confused police response to the attacks – could plausibly be explained with reference to the routines adopted by organizations (Christensen, 2013). Yet, the commission insisted on attributing this behaviour to flaws in organizational culture or leadership, which may be seen as a reflection of its understanding of organizational decision-making.

In the conclusion of the report, the commission also addressed the tension between individual- and system-oriented explanations: “In the search for scapegoats, it is easy to forget that malfunctioning systems can put individuals in situations where they are exposed to making fatal mistakes” (NOU, 2012: 457). However, in its analyses of errors in the crisis preparedness and response, it was not always clear what, if anything, was to be blamed: human error or a malfunctioning system? For example, when analysing the police operation at Utøya, the commission pointed to “severe flaws in management and coordination” (p. 121) and “severe weaknesses (...) in the execution of their operation” (p. 146). Yet, when summing up, it highlighted two factors as particularly important: low staffing at the operations centre and the lack of well-functioning communication systems. Both factors point to systemic problems, not individuals. This way of reasoning left a blurred image of whether certain individuals involved in the crisis response could be held accountable.

In sum, the commission pointed in its conclusions to some specific organizational factors (culture, leadership, attitudes) that had to be changed in order to improve governmental decision-making in crisis response. However, as shown, the empirical findings in the report could also be seen as indicating a need for changes in the formal structures of organizing. Thus, if its analysis had been grounded in other models of decision-making, the commission might have come to different conclusions and consequently emphasized other organizational factors in need of reform.

5.4 | Assessment standards

In its report, the commission provided some introductory reflections on the task of assessing a crisis event. Because crises are characterized by unpredictability, existing plans and experience can never fully cover a situation, it argued. The main challenge is to avoid that its “vision is too coloured by the knowledge of the actual end result” (NOU, 2012: 14), that is, to avoid hindsight bias. The solution is “to reconstruct both the situation and available information as it appeared to the respective actors” (p. 14).

The awareness of the risk of hindsight bias was less visible in the analysis. For example, the police was criticized for not making greater efforts in the initial phase of the Utøya operation to retrieve more boats. In hindsight, the access to boats was a decisive point, given that the police overloaded their own boat on their way to the island, which caused the engine to stall and delayed them at least ten minutes. However, no one knew initially that the police boat at a later point would stall. Moreover, the police operation commander assumed that the local fire department was on its way with its own boat, because she had ordered her subordinate to mobilize this resource. However, this operation was delayed due to a technical error. Thus, the need for more boats was not evident for those involved in the operation in the early stages (Renå, 2019).

In a similar vein, the commission’s assessment of rule-following behaviour versus improvisation appears to be coloured by the effects of the actions taken. For example, only minutes after the explosion in Oslo, one assistant operating the switchboard received detailed information about (what we in hindsight know was) the getaway car. She deviated from standard procedure, which would have been to distribute it to the operation centre by registering the information in their computerized log system. Instead, she wrote the information on a piece of paper and brought it to the operation control centre. The commission’s assessment of the operator assistant’s response was that she “showed impressive initiative and execution of tasks” (NOU, 2012: 108). Yet, it seems unlikely that the commission’s assessment would have been the same if the car had not turned out to be the getaway car (see Renå, 2019).

In other words, the commission’s assessment of crisis response was in part characterized by hindsight bias and assessing decisions based on their effects. This appears to have shaped the commission’s assessments of performance and policy recommendations, leading it to portray the attacks as more manageable and preventable than was the case.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Why is it so hard for government to learn from crisis? Whereas existing accounts highlight the particular nature of crisis and various cognitive, political and organizational constraints, this paper has looked more closely at the specific institutions involved in governmental learning from crisis. We have focused on one particular institutional mechanism: enquiry commissions.

Building on sociological theory on organizations and institutions, we have argued that these bodies face a set of tensions that makes lesson-drawing anything but a straightforward exercise. We conclude that the work of enquiry commissions exhibits tensions that condition the subsequent opportunities of government to learn from crisis. Not only do these institutions have multiple functions, they are also faced with competing professional perspectives, models of decision-making and assessment standards when examining a crisis. The discussion of the 22 July Commission has provided an illustration of how these challenges manifest themselves in the work of enquiry commissions and how they may condition the subsequent opportunities for government to learn from crisis. Exactly how this happens in each particular case is primarily an empirical question.

It must however be stressed that enquiry commissions are only one institutional mechanism through which lesson-drawing from crises occurs. Other institutional mechanisms include hearings (public, parliamentary, ad hoc), internal evaluations and courts. What institutional mechanisms exist varies between countries due to differences in their political system.

There are of course important limits to the argument and analysis presented in this paper. First, it must be emphasized that our
enquiry commissions are only loosely coupled to the evidence on the crisis response. Making sure that the “what should be done?” follows logically from the “what went wrong?” is crucial for learning. Finally, effective learning depends on balancing the experiences from the most recent crisis against existing knowledge and experiences. If not, the lessons learned from the last crisis may easily become the sources of the next.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Arjen Boin, Wout Broekema and Per Lægreid for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors had no conflict of interests related to writing this manuscript.

ENDNOTES

1 We adhere to a broad definition of institutions, which includes “not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human action” (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 947).

2 We are indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

3 A bomb explosion in the government complex akin to the first of the two terrorist attacks was among the scenarios in the government’s “Security Project” initiated in 2002. However, the project was highly classified and few were thus informed. More generally, few, if any, had anticipated a scenario with two terrorist attacks akin to 22/7, and right-wing terrorism was not considered a significant threat by the authorities.

4 All quotes from Norwegian sources are translated by the authors.

REFERENCES

Ansell, C., Boin, A., & Keller, A. (2010). Managing transboundary crises: Identifying the building blocks of an effective response system. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 18(4), 195–207. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2010.00620.x

Ashforth, A. (1990). Reckoning schemes of legitimation: On commissions of inquiry as power/knowledge forms. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 3(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.1990.tb00143.x

Bennett, C. J., & Howlett, M. (1992). The lessons of learning: Reconciling theories of policy learning and policy change. *Policy Sciences*, 25(3), 275–294. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138786

Birkland, T. A. (1997). *After disaster: Agenda setting, public policy, and focusing events*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Boin, A., & ’t Hart, P. (2003). Public leadership in times of crisis: Mission impossible? *Public Administration Review*, 63(5), 544–553. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6210.00318

Boin, A., Stern, E., ’t Hart, P., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Boudes, T., & Laroche, H. (2009). Taking off the heat: Narrative sensemaking in post-crisis inquiry reports. *Organization Studies*, 30(4), 377–396. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840608101141
Brändström, A., & Kuipers, S. (2003). From ‘Normal Incidents’ to political crises: Understanding the selective politicization of policy failures. *Government and Opposition, 38*(3), 279–305. https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7052.00101

Broekema, W. (2016). Crisis-induced learning and issue politicization in the EU: The braer, sea empress, erika, and prestige oil spill disasters. *Public Administration, 94*(2), 381–398.

Brown, A. D. (2004). Authoritative sensemaking in a public inquiry report. *Organization Studies, 25*(1), 95–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708477040403818

Christensen, J. (2013). 22.juli-kommisjonen. Perspektiver på en fortelling. *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift, 30*(3), 243–254.

Christensen, J., & Holst, C. (2017). Advisory commissions, academic expertise and democratic legitimacy: The case of Norway. *Science and Public Policy, 1*–3. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scx016

Christensen, T., Lægreid, P., & Rykkja, L. H. (2013). After a terrorist attack: Challenges for political and administrative leadership in Norway. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, 21*(3), 167–177. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.12019

Dekker, S., & Hansén, D. (2004). Learning under pressure: The effects of politicization on organizational learning in public bureaucracies. *Public Journal of Administration Research and Theory, 14*(2), 211–230. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muh014

DiMaggio, P. J., & W. W. Powell (Eds.) (1991). *Political language: Words that succeed and policies that fail*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Edelman, M. (1977). *Political language: Words that succeed and policies that fail*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Finnreite, A., L. Lango, P., Lægreid, P., & Rykkja, L. H. (2014). Organising, samfunnssekerhet og krisehåndtering. *utg. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.

Fleischer, J. (2017). Accountability under inquiry. Inquiry committees after internal security crises. In T. Christensen, & P. Lægreid (Eds.), *The routledge handbook to accountability and welfare state reforms in Europe* (Chapter 13) (pp. 180–193). London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.

George, A. L. (1980). *Presidential decisionmaking in foreign policy: The effective use of information and advice*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Gephart, R. P. (1984). Making sense of organizationally based environmental disasters. *Journal of Management, 10*(2), 205–225. https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063840100205

Haas, P. M. (1992). Introduction: Epistemic communities and international policy coordination. *International Organization, 46*(1), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300001442

Hall, P. A., & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996). Political science and the three new institutionalisms. *Political Studies, 44*(5), 936–957. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x

Holst, C. (2016). En helt vanlig utredning. *Agenda Magasin.

Holst, C., & Molander, A. (2017). Public deliberation and the fact of expertise: Making experts accountable. *Social Epistemology, 31*(3), 235–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2017.1317865

Hood, C. (2002). The risk game and the blame game. *Government and Opposition, 37*(1), 15–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00085

Høyer, T. H., Madsen, J. M., & Rabøl, S. (2013). 22. juli: Udfordringer. *Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Kingdon, J. W. (1984). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*, 2nd ed. Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company.

Lindberg, S. I. (2013). Mapping accountability: Core concepts and subtypes. *International Review of Administrative Sciences, 79*(2), 202–226.

Lode, V. (2011). Få fakta på bordet, usminket og ærlig. *Dagbladet, 12* August. Retrieved from https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/fa-fakta-pa-bordet-usminket-og-aerlig/63580095

March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1989). Rediscovering institutions: The organizational basis of politics. New York, NY: Free Press.

March, J. G., & Simon, H. A. (1993). *Organizations*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Business.

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2), 340–363. https://doi.org/10.1086/226550

Moynihan, D. P. (2008). Learning under uncertainty: Networks in crisis management. *Public Administration Review, 68*(2), 350–365. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00867.x

Moynihan, D. P. (2009). From Interccrisis to Intracrisis Learning. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, 17*(3), 189–198. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2009.00579.x

NOU (2012). *Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen* (No. 2012:14). Oslo, Norway: Departementenes servicescenter.

Parker, C. F., & Dekker, S. (2008). September 11 and postcrisis investigation: Exploring the role and impact of the 9/11 commission. In A. Boin, A. McConnell, & P.’t Hart, (Eds.), *Governing after crisis: The politics of investigation, accountability and learning* (pp. 255–282). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Perrow, C. (1999). *Normal accidents: Living with high-risk technologies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Renå, H. (2019). *Police coordination in crises. Who knew what, when, where and why in managing the terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya in 2011?* Doctoral thesis. University of Bergen, Department of Administration and Organizational Theory.

Rosenthal, U., & ’t Hart, P., & Kouznin, A., (1991). The bureau-politics of crisis management. *Public Administration, 69*(2), 211–233. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00791.x

Schlefer, J. (2012). *The assumptions economists make*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Scott, R. W., & Davis, G. F. (2007). *Organizations and organizing. rational, natural, and open system perspectives*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Smith, D., & Elliott, D. (2007). Exploring the barriers to learning from crisis: Organizational learning and crisis. *Management Learning, 38*(5), 519–538. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507607083205

Stark, A. (2018). *Public inquiries, policy learning, and the threat of future crises*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Staw, B. M., Sandelands, L. E., & Dutton, J. E. (1981). Threat rigidity effects in organizational behavior: A multilevel analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 26*(4), 501–524. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392337

Stern, E. K. (2015). Bridging the crisis learning gap: From theory to practice. In N. Schirnino, L. Taskin, C. Donis, & J. Raone (Eds.), *Organizing after crisis*. The challenge of learning (pp. 257–272). Brussels, Belgium: P.I.E. Peter Lang.

Thomas, G. (2011). A typology for the case study in social science following a review of definition, discourse, and structure. *Qualitative Inquiry, 17*(6), 511–521. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411409884

Vaughan, D. (1999). The dark side of organizations: Mistake, misconduct, and disaster. *Annual Review of Sociology, 25*, 271–305. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.271

Weick, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2011). *Managing the unexpected: Resilient performance in an age of uncertainty*. San Franciso, CA: Josey Bass, John Wiley & Sons.

---

**How to cite this article:** Renå H, Christensen J. Learning from crisis: The role of enquiry commissions. *J Contingencies and Crisis Management*. 2019;00:1–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12269