The Issues Management Process in Nonprofit Organizations

A Dissertation Presented for the
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Andrew Baird Brown
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of two special persons.

First, this dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my paternal grandfather, Charles Conn Baird, who spent the last forty years of his life serving in various volunteer roles with nonprofit organizations. His servant-leader role model, as well as his Christian faith-driven mindset to love people regardless of their racial, ethnic, or social status, has profoundly shaped my worldview.

Second, this dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother-in-law, Sondra Medlin Todd, who was a retired executive director of a regional food and clothing nonprofit organization. She constantly modeled community service and displayed sheer joy in helping others in need. Her selfless personality and Christian life was contagious and admirable. Mrs. Todd passed during the completion of this dissertation, but she will never be forgotten.

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ABSTRACT

Issues management concepts and processes have traditionally been studied within corporate contexts. Using the tools and best practices of the qualitative paradigm, this dissertation explores and expands the concepts of issues management in the novel nonprofit context. Through the diverse voices of nonprofit executives, directors, and board members, the findings suggest that these nonprofit decision makers are employing a condensed and contextualized issues management process, that nonprofit executives are acting as issues gatekeepers, and that nonprofit decision makers value issues management as a tool for integrated public relations and future crisis avoidance. The respondents further suggested that social issues, often flamed by social media, demanded special attention and experienced leadership to avoid alienating donors and partners. The findings of this research provide a pathway for future conceptual and practical explorations of nonprofit issues management processes.

Keywords: nonprofit, issues management, social media, stakeholders, public relations

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Issues Management Process in Nonprofit Organizations

In a complex 2020 cultural context of racial tension tied to the social movement of Black Lives Matter, women's shelter CEO Joyce had a difficult issue to manage. Should she and her board sign on to an open nonprofit coalition letter connecting traditional police practices to systematic racism, aligning with a significant portion of her workforce and client base? Or should she refrain from signing the letter at the suggestion of the local police chief, who said "you sign on to that letter and this will be a wound that never heals between us." Siding with the chief would support her longstanding relationship with local law enforcement; law enforcement who had for years been cooperatively co-creating an on-the-ground system of domestic violence client referrals to her organization. For this regional nonprofit, this sweeping cultural and racial issue was no longer in the headlines; it was now an important nonprofit social and perception issue that demanded strategic management and careful stakeholder perception management.

In an unsettling 2020 context of a complete rebuild from a recent sweeping and destructive wildfire, an outspoken board member warned the veteran faith-based nonprofit camp and micro farm CEO Juan of the potential dangers of public building code policy challenges, financial realities, and related donor perception issues. Juan recalled the board member's words in an open meeting:

> You know, he says, "I'm concerned…we're driving off a cliff"…and I realized…together, we agreed to say, you know what, we are going to have to take a deeper dive into some of the things we are doing.

This board member's warning of and awareness of potential horizon issues, noted the CEO, literally saved the organization from a future crisis. In this charged environment, a bristly board member's strategic perception of horizon issues challenged a CEO to rethink and retrench, to slow down and consider stakeholder input, and to ultimately strategically manage salient issues tied to public policy and organizational sustainability.

The above narratives were derived directly from the nonprofit decision maker interviews tied to this research, and these scenarios will also be considered in chapter 4. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Issues Management

Issues management, as both an academic concept and professional public relations process, has been traditionally focused on affecting public policy through an organization's proactive ability to identify and influence public policy issues to more closely align with core corporate organizational goals (Brown, 1979; Heath & Cousino, 1990; Jones & Chase,1979). However, a growing body of modern literature suggests issues management has a broader conceptual and practical value, with increasing ties to more than public policy influence; but also to macro trending and complex modern social issues as well as micro operational and perception concerns (Coombs et al., 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath, 2018a; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017).

The literature suggests that all types of organizations gain an advantage by the identification of and strategic management of emerging issues. The identification and management of issues is tied to a process - a systems-driven issues management construct - which focuses on taking appropriate steps, in appropriate order, to yield desired stakeholder alignment and perception (Coombs et al., 2019; Jones & Chase, 1979; Lauzen, 1997; White, 2009). From this vantagepoint, issues management is tied to core public relations theory and practice, and is therefore connected to an organization's desire and responsibility to build strategic stakeholder relational capital (Coombs et al., 2019; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Lauzen, 1997; Taylor, 2010; White, 2009).

The recognition and strategic management of issues has an additional salient conceptual, relational, and practical advantage: crisis avoidance. In a cultural environment of blame and attribution, organizations can and should be proactive in avoiding various types of crises (Coombs et al., 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath & Cousino, 1990; Heider, 1958; White, 2009). Issues management and issues management systems have been conceptualized as early warning functions, a proactive conceptual position for scanning and adapting, and thus avoiding or preventing crises. Issues management, as a type of crisis avoidance and prevention, has various conceptual constructs, tied to both linear and holistic processes which will be further explored in the pages of this study (Cheng, 2018b; Coombs et. al., 2019; Jaques, 2007; Taylor, 2010).

With more than 30-40 years of literature and professional practice focused mainly on for-profit corporate organizations, issues management and issues management processes have not been explored in the nonprofit context (Boris, 2010; Pressgrove & Waters, 2019; Sisco et al., 2011).

Nonprofit Organizations and Nonprofit Stakeholders

Nonprofit organizations are founded for the public good, have no shareholders, and exist, in the words of Drucker "to bring about a change in individuals and society" (2012, p. 3). Nonprofits are organized for religious, educational, charitable, and scientific purposes, and any revenues generated by these organizations are not distributed to shareholders or owners, but rather refocused on nonprofit operations (Frumkin & Kim, 2001; Pressgrove & Waters, 2019).

More than 1.5 million U.S. nonprofit organizations, also called the third sector, solve cultural needs and pain points, distribute and manage public and private funds for altruistic and charitable purposes, and contribute to the U.S. economy through job creation and community reinvestment (Waters, 2014; Worth, 2020). Food, clothing, and shelter-related nonprofits, mainly falling into human service and religious nonprofit taxonomy categories (representing the largest combined category of nonprofits), consist of mostly small-to-medium community and regional nonprofit organizations: food banks and kitchens, homeless shelters, women and children's services and shelters, and even micro farming enterprises addressing food deserts, food insecurity, and food justice (Broad, 2016; Jones, 2019; Pressgrove & Waters, 2019). Some scholars have noted that these food, clothing, and shelter-related organizations have traditionally been public policy and social issue neutral, preferring to not bite the hand of the government grant cycle that feeds them, not to alienate private donors, and to instead stay in their lane of service and out of political and social discussions (Albrecht et al., 2018; Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Barman, 2008; Chavesc et al., 2004; Frumkin & Clarke, 2000; Jaskyte,

2017). As the findings of this dissertation demonstrate, this trend of neutrality may be shifting.

Nonprofit organizations have unique management and decision-making structures, complex financial support systems, and diverse internal and external stakeholders (Renz, 2016; Waters, 2014; Worth, 2020). Recent studies have broadened nonprofit stakeholder definitions beyond the traditional board, staff, and donor stakeholder categories to highlight the important roles of additional stakeholders such as nonprofit clients and nonprofit community partners (LeRoux, 2009a; Manetti & Toccafondi, 2014; Pressgrove & Waters, 2019). Using relationship-driven public relations theoretical constructs, nonprofit public relations scholars have explored values and connections with various stakeholders (see for example: Cho, 2012; Cho & Auger, 2017; Cho & Kelly, 2014; Kelly, 2001; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016; Waters, 2009), but no public relations scholarship has explored stakeholder relationships through an issues management lens.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore nonprofit decision makers' perception of the strategic issues management process, and to consider how nonprofit stakeholders help shape this process. By using previous business-context issues management process models as guideposts, and by employing the best practices of qualitative paradigm methodologies, this study proposes to provide thick description and salient understanding to this unique nonprofit-context phenomenon.

Justification for the Dissertation

The justification for this dissertation is anchored to calls for additional research in two broad areas of public relations: issues management and the nonprofit context. Partially answering these calls, this study employs a lived-experience and multivocal nonprofit leaders' perspective to these conceptual areas. In addition to theoretical and contextual academic expansion, this dissertation proposes practical applications for nonprofit decision makers, who are under increasing public pressure to be more business-like in strategic planning, public relations, transparency, and social-issues awareness (Maier et al., 2016).

The study of issues and issues management has demonstrated various periods or cycles of research, starting in the late 1970s and continuing through the early 2000s. In the last twenty years, however, issues management has been, in many ways, overshadowed in public relations scholarship by post-crisis reputational models, and various derivative studies (Cheng, 2018b). This trend led leading scholars such as Taylor (2010) to call for changes. In 2010, Taylor noted crisis management "must move beyond its preference for studying organizational tactics and strategies after a crisis has occurred" and instead focus on internal organizational processes to better understand "how and why crisis is allowed to foment in an organization" (p. 698). This call was echoed by other scholars who argued that an appropriate view of and practice of issues management was the answer (Heath & Palenchar, 2008; Jaques, 2007; White, 2009).

Issues management conceptual conversations have reappeared in modern literature, pushed back to the top by social media and social issue contexts. These social issues, note modern scholars, have caused organizations to reprioritize issues

management and environmental scanning, as organizations carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of taking sides (Coombs et al., 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath, 2018b).

This dissertation directly takes up the challenges of scholars by considering organizational communication processes through a lens of issues management. The lived experience of decision makers, and internal organization issues management processes are essential to this study. This dissertation also explores how nonprofit organizations are experiencing the current pressures to take a side on social issues, providing preliminary data to shine a light on conceptual discussions of the day.

Additionally, this dissertation fills a gap in a growing public relations research context: nonprofit organization. A nuanced set of researchers, many with primary connection to nonprofit public relations pioneer Kelly (1993, 2001), have extended traditional and trending relationship-focused public relations theories into this nonprofit context. Scholars such as Sisco, Cho, Waters, Pressgrove, and McKeever have become leaders in this academic area of study. Three progressive metastudies and nonprofit-specific overviews have demonstrated no studies tied to issues management processes in this fledgling nonprofit context. Therefore, this dissertation also fills a salient gap by extending traditional and modern issues management concepts into this growing body of nonprofit public relations literature (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019; Sisco et al., 2013; Waters, 2014).

Finally, in addition to the salient conceptual and contextual values of this dissertation, the author of this study, with more than 30 years of experience in nonprofit leadership as a public relations professional, executive, and board member, has a desire to

demonstrate direct heuristic and pragmatic value of this dissertation research. Nonprofit decision makers, often distracted by day-to-day operations, may lack the personal bandwidth, and/or appropriate staff to fully employ environmental scanning or focus on strategic management of trending and horizon issues. Therefore, there is a hope that this research will have pragmatic value in nonprofit public relations by providing a practical nonprofit public relations issues management framework; a framework influenced by both the best scholars and the best practices of the field. In this way this dissertation also provides a public service to the often overworked and overlooked third-sector leaders.

Structure of the Dissertation

The structure of this dissertation must be correctly stitched together to demonstrate a salient connection among existing theoretical constructs, methodological tools, and emergent data discovery. While the first chapter has provided a snapshot of the dissertation, the second chapter demonstrates the validity and weight of a significant body of literature in three essential and core public relations conceptual areas: issues management, relationship management, and stakeholder theory. Further, Chapter 2 will consider how portions of these three essential public relations constructs have been explored and expanded into a nonprofit context and will also consider existing holes in conceptual and contextual nonprofit public relations expansions.

The third chapter demonstrates how a post-positivist ontological paradigm was mixed with emergent qualitative epistemological tools to explore the previously unknown area of issues management processes in nonprofit contexts. Over a period of two months, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the lived experience and

on-the-ground issues management processes among a national convenience sample of nonprofit decision makers. These decision makers, demonstrated in the sample as nonprofit CEOs, managers, and board members, provided their experiences and perceptions of the issues management process. With previous literature and known issues management processes in mind, the conglomerate dataset consisting of 30 hours of recordings and 250 pages of transcripts was then explored for emergent patterns and themes to answer questions of issues management processes, stakeholder engagement in the processes, social-issue side taking, and the perceived value of issues management in crisis avoidance.

The fourth chapter outlines the results of the research and demonstrates the emergent themes relevant to the research questions of this dissertation. Using the multivocality of diverse nonprofit-decision makers, this chapter considers how divergent stakeholders describe the process of nonprofit issues management; an emergent theme of stakeholder co-creation of issues management identification; the potential ties between age, experience, and the perceived need to virtue signal on social issues; and finally, the repeated theme of experienced nonprofit decision makers championing pragmatic issues management as a valuable tool for crisis avoidance.

The final chapter of this dissertation provides a platform for discussion of the findings of this study, and considers how these preliminary findings pave a never-explored pathway of extension of core public relations and issues management concepts into this nonprofit context. This discussion will be fueled by conceptual expansions of issues processes, will join the growing literature that explores nonprofit client stakeholder empowerment, will consider the increasing conceptual and pragmatic question of social

issues virtue signaling, and will finally discuss why proactive issues management practical and conceptual values should push the academy to rethink two decades of crisis management study. This chapter will conclude with not only these conceptual considerations but will further explore the heuristic and practical values of this study for small and medium nonprofit management and public relations practice

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues and Issues Management in Crisis Management Contexts

Crisis management is a significant area of academic research tied to the related concepts of reputation management, stakeholder attribution, and, in many cases, long-term organizational sustainability (Coombs & Holliday, 2018; Straub & Jonkman, 2017; White, 2009). Most public relations researchers would concede that issues, risk, and crisis are related areas, but would disagree about the philosophical roots, theoretical constructs, and prescriptive values of each concept (Coombs et al., 2019; Heath, 2018a; Heath & Cousino, 1990; White, 2009).

This dissertation employed a modern issues management lens that views issues management as a proactive and crisis preventative public relations process; a process grounded in traditional two-way symmetrical stakeholder communication, and a process focused on horizon concerns, crisis prevention and organizational success and sustainability. From this vantagepoint, issues management fills the ongoing proactive and early warning function of strategic crisis management and is part of the glue that holds strategic and salient crisis management together (Heath, 2018a; Jaques, 2007, 2014; White, 2009).

In light of this perspective, the first objective of this chapter is to consider where issues and issues management fits within a broad crisis, risk, and issues umbrella. Next, this chapter will consider how issues management concepts and definitions have developed over time, and will further consider how salient issues management viewpoints shape the driving questions of this study. Finally, this chapter will consider the

challenges, opportunities, and practicalities of extending issues management concepts into the nonprofit context.

The Conceptual and Practical Role of Public Relations: Relationships

This dissertation will take the view that public relations is an organizational process focused on relationship management with current and future stakeholders; stakeholders that are essential to the organization's mutually beneficial existence within society. Using traditional public relations conceptual frames, managing these relationships requires long-term trust, mutual commitment, and honest and transparent two-way communication (Grunig, 1992; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Organizations of all types (corporate, government, nonprofit) need relationships to help achieve goals "that are valued both by the management and by the strategic constituencies both inside and outside the organization" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 8).

While this dissertation will later argue that all core theoretical public relations constructs are really about relationships, it is important to begin this section of literature noting that relationships, and the organization and stakeholder perception of the strength and value of these relationships, are essential to public relations (Macnamara, 2016).

Therefore, issues and crisis management (managing potentially relationship-damaging practices and information) should not be seen as stand-alone concepts or functions, but rather (as will be considered later) as part of the relationship management process (Heath, 2018b; Jaques, 2014). Issues and crisis management, and appropriate issues and crisis communication, are therefore practical public relations functions not just for social media spin or organizational emergency reputation triage, but rather salient and holistic relationship management tools for strengthening long-term strategic stakeholder

trust and commitment (White, 2009). This dissertation is interested in how nonprofit decision makers strategically walk through the issues management process in light of the salience of long-term stakeholder relationship management.

Defining Crisis

Understanding crisis management begins with a strong definition of a crisis. An early contextual definition was suggested by Pearson and Clair (1998) when they noted "an organizational crisis is a low probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by the ambiguity of cause, effects, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that a decision must be made swiftly" (p. 60). Coombs (2007) noted that "crises are taken as a threat to organizational reputation. Crises damage the reputation, and such changes can affect how stakeholders interact with the organization" (2007, p. 163). Coombs and Holladay (2015) would later expand this definition by stating that a crisis is "an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 3). These aforementioned scholars, according to Jaques (2007, 2104) and Cheng (2018a) are viewing crises as an event, rather than as an interrelated process. Much of the scholarship related to crisis management is post-event and case-study oriented (Cheng, 2018a; Taylor, 2010).

Post-Crisis Management and Communication

The study of how organizations react to and communicate about a crisis event, i.e., post-crisis management and communication, has become a field unto itself (Cheng, 2018a; Ma & Zhan, 2016). A bloom of research and models in the 1980s and 1990s focused on psychological post-crisis stakeholder blame and various conceptual

approaches to post-crisis organizational reputation repair communication (Bowen & Zheng, 2015; Coombs et al., 2019; Sisco et al., 2010).

Examples such as Coombs' (2007) widely studied situational crisis communication theory, provided models for matching crisis communication response to crisis type, suggesting stakeholders were more likely to hold organizations responsible in sliding-scale crisis severities. Other approaches, such as discourse of renewal (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) employed organizational communication and shared-values frames. Contemporary work in crisis communication theory has shifted to 'media-as-message' conceptualizations of crisis communication, as can be seen in constructs such as the social media crisis communication model (Austin & Jin, 2017; Liu et al., 2011). While a full study of these post-crisis theories and models is not directly applicable to this study, this literature helps demark the contemporary academic area of crisis communication as a study of reactive means and models for post-crisis communication strategies and tactics.

Risk

Unlike the financial sector where risk is primarily defined as a fiduciary concern, risk and risk communication in public relations contexts generally involves questions of natural environmental concerns, public safety, and public health (Coombs et al., 2019; Heath & Palenchar, 2008). Risk communication is often tied to government or energy emergency management contexts, and theoretical studies in this area have been frequently associated with broad-scale government-driven emergency communication and related message receptivity (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Perko et al., 2014). Risk communication is therefore defined as public health, natural environment or public safety

communication, traditionally tied to emergency management organizations. Risk and risk communication, as defined, are therefore outside the scope of this study.

Issues Management: A Proactive and Crisis Preventative Process

While any study in this broad context should consider the elements of crisis communication and risk, this study follows a path of scholarship that suggests that an inclusive study of crisis management should not be focused on post-crisis strategies and communication or risk considerations alone (events and aftermaths), but should instead add, or even lead with, issues and issues management (proactive and preventative processes). "I believe our field must move beyond its preference for studying organizational tactics and strategies after a crisis has occurred," noted Taylor (2010, p. 688). Instead "we should try to understand how and why crisis is allowed to foment in an organization" (Taylor, 2010, p. 688).

It is salient to note that this dissertation views all crisis management as *an ongoing public relations process* rather than as a singular event. This process of crisis management has often been viewed linearly and relationally (Cheng, 2018a). Shadows and shouts for a linear crisis management process viewpoint can be seen in the works of Heath (Heath, 2018a; Heath & Cousino, 1990); Heath and Palenchar (2008); White (2009); Taylor (2010); Lauzen (1997), and more contemporary work by Straub and Jonkman (2016). Hints of these linear concepts can also be seen in recent social issues scholarship by Coombs and Holiday (2015, 2019).

From this perspective, issues management can be seen as a *first or primary step in the crisis management process*, and is, in many ways, influenced by the early issues

management processes delineated by the seminal work of Jones and Chase (1979), which will be discussed later in this dissertation. A typology of this this linear process model with issues management as the first step can be seen in Figure 2.1.

Crisis management can also be seen as a relational construct, with issues management having interactive relationship with crisis preparedness and prevention. The key scholarship in this regard comes from Jaques (2007, 2014). This relational and integrated view, noted Jaques (2007), "avoids simplistic errors such as the belief that issue management relies mainly on lobbying, or that crisis management is really little more than effective media relations, or that a crisis is over when the flames die down" (p. 156). From this perspective issues management is seen as *an integral and primary function of crisis management*. Jaques' relational model can be seen in Figure 2.2.

Jaques' work has gained further contemporary attention as scholars consider the role of social media in crisis management. Jaques' model was highlighted in a recent study that considered the salience of issues management via social media monitoring as a type of pragmatic process demonstrated by various European industries (Straub & Jonkman, 2017). Jaques' concepts were also explored in recent scholarship tied to linguistics, social media, and automated crisis detection, wherein the authors considered the salience of Jaques' relational-driven issues concepts vs. Coombs' isolated crisis events perspectives (Borden et al., 2020).



Figure 2.1: A Linear Model of Issues and Crisis Management. This model demonstrates the value of issues management in the proactive stage, and also suggests that issues management is an essential function of crisis management. Adapted from "Conflict Management: Dealing with Issues, Risks, and Crisis," Eds. G.T. Cameron & D.L. Wilcox, 2009*, Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*: New York: Pearson Education, p. 245.



Figure 2.2: The Relational and Holistic Model of Issues and Crisis Management. This model demonstrates the value of issues management in the crisis prevention sector, and also demonstrates the interrelation of issues management to other facets of crisis management. Adapted from "Issue Management and Crisis Management: An Integrated, Non-Linear, Relational Construct," by Tony Jaques, 2007*, Public Relations Review, 33, p. 150.*

Regardless of how this area of scholarship is conceived or conceptualized (linearly or relationally), this dissertation takes the view that all crisis management *should function as a process, as part of an integrated public relations system.* Further, borrowing from scholars such as Lauzen (1997), White (2009), and Heath (2018a), this dissertation takes the view that conceptual and practical issues management should proceed crisis management and that well-practiced issues management processes can help prevent the need for crisis management and crisis communication. The following sections will review and define issues and issues management.

Issues and Issues Management

Defining Issues

Issues can be defined through a myriad of cultural concepts and has unique cultural clues and interchangeable meanings. From a broad public relations standpoint, an issue, simply defined by Coombs (2019), is "a point of contention between two or more parties" (p. 33). However, this definition needs further context. A definition of issues must be bracketed by the competing bookends of organizational public relations per se: organizational responsibility and stakeholder perception. Issues are therefore related to the delicate balance between an organization's strategic and responsible goals, and the counterbalance of what stakeholders *think or perceive* the organization's responsibilities should be (Coombs 2019; Heath, 2018b). In this light, Heath and Palenchar (2008) define the concept of an issue as "a contestable point, a difference of opinion regarding fact, value, policy; the resolution of which has consequences for the organization's strategic plan" (p. 93). In other words, issues are only issues when "one or more human agents

attaches significance to a situation or perceived problem" (Crable & Vibbert, 1985, p. 5). In short, an issue brought forth in this organizational and stakeholder context, noted Chase (1984), is an "unsettled matter which is ready for a decision" (p. 38).

Early issues scholarship suggested that these unsettled matters or problems were linked to shifting public policy or socio-political values (Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Jones & Chase, 1979). These early definitions assumed that government was setting the cultural agenda; modern issue linkages are broader. Scholars such as Coombs (2017, 2019) and Heath (2018a) would suggest that the locus of cultural decision making has shifted to organizations and not the government. Not only are people looking to organizations to enact positive change, but social issues now also play a significant role. Coombs and Holladay (2018) noted "social issues have risen as a concern for firms in large part due to digital (and social) media" (p. 81). The court of public opinion, driven by social and digital media, can either fan the flames of an issue and cause it to trend; or bump an otherwise important issue out of public view due to the rapid cycle of modern mass media and social media consumption (Seng, Brown, & Boatwright, 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Straub & Jonkman, 2017).

While political and social concerns rule the day, it should also be noted that scholars suggest that issues can vary in significance due to cultural or even geographic variance. "What may be an issue of public and private concern in one nation or locale, may be a nonissue in another because of social attitudes, cultural characteristics, political and/or economic differences, and even geographical or topographical differences" (Wilson, 1990. p. 45).

Organizations, stakeholders, as well as the general public, may therefore have differing viewpoints about the same issue (Coombs, 2019; Heath, 2018b).

> While organizations, stakeholders, and constituencies may be concerned about the same issue, their perspectives are rarely the same. The role of the issue management process is to divine and determine the existence and likely impacts of these contestable points of difference (Dougall, 2008 p. 1).

It is this role of managing issues that will be explored in the following section.

Defining Issues Management

Dougal (2008) suggested that issues management is "an anticipatory, strategic process that helps organizations detect and respond appropriately to emerging trends or changes in the socio-political environment" (p. 1). Further, Coombs (2019) added that "issues management is a broader set of communicative interventions designed to influence decisions…issues management is about exercising influence…and issues management was intended to be proactive" (p. 33).

The anticipatory or horizon element of issues management is a driving factor of issues management conceptual development from the 70s until today. Jones and Chase (1979) noted that "one must communicate to management that the anticipation of and response to public policy requires a long-term institutionalization of a new function which identifies early and allows sufficient time for analysis and corporate response" (p. 7). Vibbert and Crable (1985), and later Heath and Cousino (1990), would champion this anticipatory element, with Heath calling strategic management (horizon planning and operations) one of the key pillars of modern issues management. Issues management can be used to "help organizations plan and manage by making strategic adaptations needed

to achieve harmony and foster mutual interests within the communities where they operate" (Heath & Palenchar, 2008, p. 9). This strategic or forward-thinking process of how issues might impact or be perceived by stakeholders is further tied to core concepts in public relations excellence theory (Grunig & Repper, 1992) as well as early concepts of dialogic engagement theory (Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003).

The concepts of anticipation and strategic planning were further distilled in Heath and Cousino's (1990) metastudy of issues management concepts. Heath and Cousino demonstrated "four functions" required for issues management (p. 10-12):

1) *smart planning and operations (integration of public policy analysis)*
2) *tough defense and smart offense (what needs to be said to whom and with what effect)*
3) *getting the house in order (what is required to achieve CSR)*
4) *scouting the terrain (proactive issues monitoring)*

Each of these elements speaks to the core salient concept: *anticipation.* This anticipatory or horizon mindset has driven issues management concepts in the past, and it is this same mindset which drives what has been modernly defined as strategic issues management (SIM). This SIM concept was originally defined as "the management of organizational and community resources through the public policy process to advance organizational interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with those stakeholders" (Heath, 2006, p. 79). Heath has updated his definition to modern terms to SIM by highlighting not only the "organizational interests" as he did in 2006, but by suggesting a more balanced and co-creational approach. Heath (2018b) suggested that modern SIM "seeks not to avoid legislation or regulation but to balance the interests of all segments of

the community in the public policy arena, so that each enjoys the proper amount of reward or benefit in proportion to the cost for allowing industry, or for instance, free rein to enact its own operation standards" (p. 397).

Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Issues Management

It was noted that issues and issues management have provided direction in conceptual development of what issues are, and that issues management should be a proactive and strategic process. With these concepts in mind, this section, using Taylor, Heath, and Coombs as a guide, will briefly consider broad communication theoretical traditions and their influence on issues management, and will then follow these considerations with suggestions for nonprofit-specific application of issues management theoretical constructs. Finally, an argument will be made that systems approaches to issues management are salient in this context.

The Systems and Strategic Approaches to Issues Management

Understanding a systems approach to communication is best understood by considering the early linear models of communication such as the model developed by Shannon and Weaver (1963). The sender-message-medium-receiver (and variant) models commonly taught to communication undergrads focus on how basic communication works through a process or system, and these examples help one understand what is meant by *communications systems.* Bowen and Heath (2005) suggested that a systems approach seeks equilibrium and symmetry and is therefore focused on balanced *flows of information* in an organization. Communication systems approaches provide, according to Taylor (2010), "ways in which organizations relate to their environments" (p. 258).

Coombs et. al. (2019) suggested that "a systems approach emphasizes environmental scanning and the systematic nature of issues management (p. 34)." Each of the above scholars help demonstrate that the original Jones and Chase (1979) issues management process model exemplifies a seminal system approach to issues management with its five key process steps:

1) *issues monitoring/scanning*
2) *issues identification*
3) *issues analysis*
4) *issue change strategy options*
5) *issue action program*

The Jones and Chase issues model is still in use by modern scholars and practitioners, and many of the published work in this dissertation includes some reference or reflection on this systems approach. In addition, the Jones and Chase (1979) model continues to be expanded and recontextualized. Prominent examples include Lauzen's (1997) work on connecting Grunig's two-way public relations with strategic issues diagnosis (an expansion of scanning and identification); Taylor's (2010; Kent & Taylor, 2002) early conceptualizations of dialogic engagement in the issues management and crisis contexts (which will be discussed below); and the long-term work of Jaques (2007, 2014) which engages a holistic issues, risk, and crisis framework into relational model. In many ways all modern issues, risk, and crisis scholarship demonstrates a partial expansion of the Jones and Chase systems model.

The Rhetorical Approach

The rhetorical approach to issues management focuses on "meaning management with an emphasis on defining the issue" (Coombs et. al., 2019, p. 34). This issues management approach, primarily displayed in the early work of Crable and Vibbert (1985), suggested that Jones and Chase did not go far enough. Crable and Vibbert suggested that an issue has life cycles conceptualized as five levels: potential, imminent, current, critical, and dormant. It was also suggested that there are three basic strategies for dealing with the environment: reactive, adaptive, and dynamic (Crable & Vibbert, 1985). In the rhetorical approach, "the issues definition strategy is critical because the issue managers seek to define an issue in a way that favors their course of action for resolving the issue" (Coombs et. al., 2019, p. 34).

The Engagement Approach

The engagement approach centers and expands on relationship building, demonstrating synthesis of concepts posited by Gruning and Repper (1992) as well as Heath (2018a, 2018b). This relationship-like approach suggests "this is the convergence of organizational interests with public interests that provides both parties with the greatest opportunity for issue resolution through communication" (Taylor et. al. 2003, p. 261). A key factor in this dialogic engagement approach, as would later be clarified by Kent and Taylor (2014), is the concept of propinquity, meaning that "publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 26). In summary, the engagement approach to issues management is focused on two-way communication and is co-creational instead of organizational-centric. This variant is best summarized by

Coombs et. al. (2019), "the engagement approach seeks mutual benefit, an outcome that is lacking in the systems and rhetorical approaches" (p. 34).

While these three overarching approaches to issues management constructs are salient, this dissertation will take a focused systems-view of issues management for two important reasons. First, systems approaches are well documented in the literature by leading issues-management scholars, and second, systems approaches are also easily digested by non-academic audiences (including nonprofit decision makers).

Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations are unique entities: they are not businesses, and they are not government agencies. Instead, nonprofits are organizations focused on religious, educational, charitable, and scientific purposes; and these organizations do not return a profit to investors - rather they return revenues to organizational programmatic purposes (Frumkin & Kim, 2001; Pressgrove & Waters, 2019). As of December 2020, the IRS and watchdog groups such as *Guidestar* suggest there are now 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States. "Also referenced to as the third sector, voluntary sector, civil society or charitable sector, nonprofit organizations operate outside of the government and for-profit sectors" (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019, p. 191).

According to 2020 data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), the nonprofit sector contributed approximately $1 trillion to the U.S. economy last year, and represented 5.6 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product. Further, according to the NCCS 2020 reports, private donors, foundations, and businesses donated over $4 billion to U.S. based charities, and 25.1 percent of U.S. adults volunteered a total

of 8.8 billion hours; with most of the volunteer efforts being used in food prep, delivering of clothing and other goods, providing care, teaching, counseling, and mentoring. The largest percentage of dollars and time given was in the religious and human services nonprofit sectors (NCCS, 2020). According to McKeever and Gaddy (2016), the nonprofit sector is also a significant U.S. employer, demonstrating $634 million in annual payroll and wages, and employing an estimated 14.4 million people, or approximately 10 percent of the domestic U.S. workforce.

Nonprofits are often started as a consequence of observed pain points or community needs. Individual states have processes to grant initial charitable status and means of incorporation to charitable organizations (Worth, 2020). After filing articles of incorporation with individual states, most charitable organizations apply for federal tax-exempt designation from the IRS, an arduous process that can take up to two years (Worth, 2020). Once federal exempt organization status is granted, the IRS requires these nonprofit organizations to file annual financial and programming reports (different types of reports are required based on a gross organizational annual income sliding scale) (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019; Sisco et al., 2013).

According to the NCCS, there are several key types of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations defined by the IRS. 501(c) 3 public charities are the largest type (representing 2/3 of all nonprofits). A public charity is an organization that receives more than one-third of organizational support funding from gifts, grants, contributions, member fees and certain gross receipts and has defined programming. Public charities and private foundations are different in that a private foundation is usually funded by an individual donor, family, or small groups of donors which engage in grant-making

activities to other nonprofits rather than direct programming (McRay, 2009; Worth, 2020).

Nonprofits are then further classified into various broad categories as can be seen reflected in Figure 2.3. The human services and religious categories contain the largest number of combined nonprofit organizations, and according to NCCS 2020 reports, represent top sectors of gross donations, as well as record the largest percentage of volunteer hours. These religious and human services nonprofits are the type of nonprofits most people associate with a nonprofit; and many of these are small community nonprofits which are "creative and flexible, capable of great customization" (Barrett, 2009, p. 2).

According to NCCS, *Charity Navigator* and The Foundation Center, human services and religious nonprofit categories are made of up of organizations such as community food pantries, homeless shelters, women and children's organizations, or habitat-type housing organizations commonly found in communities across the U.S.

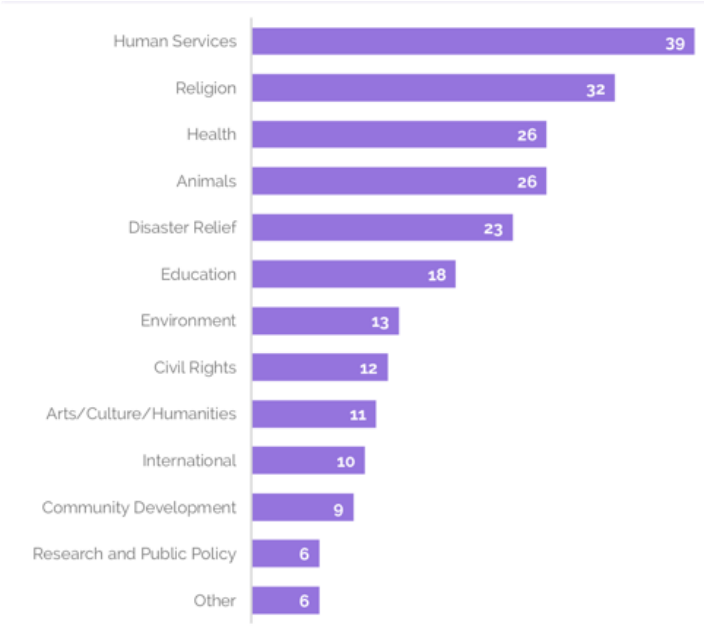

Figure 2.3: Charitable Causes U.S. Citizens Donated to in 2019. This figure demonstrates relative donation percentages by common nonprofit category (data from a recent survey, n = 1242*).* Adapted from "What Motivates Americans to Donate to Charity," by Jamie Ballard*, 2019,* www.you.gov.

Nonprofit organizations obtaining 501(c) 3 IRS category public charity status have both significant benefits and significant restrictions as clearly summarized by Pressgrove and Waters (2019, p. 191):

> Organizations filing under the 501(c)3 category have many benefits, including exemption from federal, state, and local taxes; the opportunity to receive government and private foundation grants; and the ability to offer tax deductions to individual donors. Nonprofits that have this 501(c)3 designation, however, may not engage in partisan activity (including intervening in political campaigns for candidates for public office). These nonprofits are also prohibited from using funds attained from the government to lobby.

Nonprofits, and especially 501(c)3 public charity nonprofits, must therefore walk a cautious line, balancing the requirements of their federal tax-exempt status and donor perceptions of donation usage, while also distributing a mixture of private and government grants and donations to their clients in the way of programming and services. Many nonprofits are a channel of funds for community needs; yet may also shape and advocate for client needs, values, and perspectives; and may further (and simultaneously) be implementing public policy dollars and programs. These multidimensional roles suggest complex intersections, challenging stakeholder demands, and complex boundaries for organizational advocacy and sustainability (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Daniel & Fyall, 2019; Guo & Saxton, 2018; LeRoux, 2009b; McKeever, 2013; Sisco et al., 2013).

Nonprofit Organizational Structures and Management

A comprehensive overview of nonprofit structures and governance is outside the scope of this study; however, a simple overview of basic nonprofit organizational structures and management can help one understand how nonprofits operate and can further delineate key players in nonprofit decision-making processes.

Nonprofit organizations are generally originated and organized with a board of directors that includes a president and at least two additional board officers (secretary and treasurer), as required by articles of incorporation in the state of the organization's founding. Should the organization file for federal IRS tax-exempt status, the IRS requires proof of state articles of incorporation, as well as a list of board members, officers, and roles (Renz, 2016; Worth, 2020).

The organizations' self-defined articles of incorporation set forth the basic rules, offices, and functions of the board, as well as the organization's primary name and location (Worth, 2020). State articles of incorporation are often quite simplistic, with more diverse board policy such as term limits and committee structures being designed and adopted by the organization at a later time, as may be required by organizational growth. The board members and board officers may not, by state and federal law, be paid or otherwise significantly compensated. However, the board is allowed to designate and hire an executive director to manage the operation and programming of the organization (Jaskyte, 2017; Renz, 2016).

While a start-up nonprofit board may donate significant time or expertise to early operations, the role of the nonprofit board traditionally involves legal and fiduciary oversight, state and federal compliance, long-term strategic planning, fundraising, and the

management of a paid executive officer (Jaskyte, 2004, 2017; Worth, 2020). Although bylaws are divergent by organization, board members are either elected or appointed for varying terms, and are "often recruited or chosen on the merits of business acumen, professional expertise, community influence, and financial capacity to support the needs of the human service organization" (Olinske & Hellman, 2017, p. 95).

The paid executive director (with various titles such as CEO or director) is then generally responsible for the day-to-day operations of the organization, programming, the hiring and management of additional staff, the recruitment of volunteers and partners, fundraising, budgeting, and other duties (Olinske & Hellman, 2017). The paid executive director may also serve as an ex-officio member of the board, and according to the size and scope of the nonprofit, may work with the board on various strategic projects (Olinske & Hellman, 2017). Depending on the organization, the executive director may also take various roles in the recruitment and retention of new board members (Renz, 2016; Worth, 2020). Nonprofit executive directors may exhibit diverse leadership styles, which is a study into itself (Bish & Becker, 2016).

Traditional nonprofit organizational charts demonstrate a vertical hierarchy with the board and executive director at the top, supervisors and coordinators in the middle, followed by entry-level positions, volunteers, and clients at the bottom (Freund, 2017; Worth, 2020). Staff roles may be filled by paid workers and/or recurring, shift-working volunteers, as well as short-term episodic volunteers (Maier et al., 2016; McKee & McKee, 2008).

The Nonprofit Decision-Making Process

Processing inputs, weighing alternatives, and then choosing and implementing a decision is conceptually straightforward, but in nonprofit organizations this practical process can be complex (Remington, 2017). Therefore, getting to yes or no involves an interesting process in nonprofits; a process influenced by factors such as organizational history and culture, board-executive trust, and the relative involvement of non-executive/non-board stakeholders.

Nonprofit organizations are often started by community-minded groups or individuals who have a particular mission or set of values in mind. These core missions and values help shape the culture of the nonprofit, and, in many cases, drive initial and long-term decision-making processes. The question of "what is the mission" helps organizations filter and weigh what questions, opportunities, or risks should come forward for initial consideration, and further helps the organization decide between alternatives and appropriate and final decision implementation (Krug & Weinberg, 2004; Remington, 2017). In contrast to a business, nonprofits often ask questions of mission or value first rather than the question of financial ramification first. In many ways this mission-first mindset flips Carrol's pyramid upside down, making philanthropic responsibilities rather than financial responsibilities the core goal of the nonprofit organization (Carroll, 1991, 2016). This mission-driven culture is common among many nonprofit organizations, and is therefore salient to this study (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019).

In addition to mission, the relative level of board-executive trust can impact how decisions are initiated, weighed, and ratified. As the nonprofit literature and practice

demonstrate, the power and decision centers of nonprofit management are inconsistent, varying by organization size, executive experience, and board makeup (Campbell, 2008; Reid & Turbide, 2012; Remington, 2017). Traditionally, tensions have flared between boards made of business or community leaders, and CEOs that may have come up through the nonprofit ranks (Olinske & Hellman, 2017). While there is a modern trend for large nonprofits to demonstrate a businesslike and strong CEO, as well as correlated trend to trust these CEOs, a lack of clarity of role and scope of the board vs. the executive may continue to cause friction and cloud decision-making processes. Regardless of traditional or modern leadership structures, nonprofit organizations that succeed in effective strategic decision making repeatedly demonstrate a level of clear communication and mutual trust between the board and CEO (Campbell, 2008; Jaskyte, 2017; Olinske & Hellman, 2017).

Therefore, the decision makers of a nonprofit are board members/officers, the executive director, and in some instances, middle managers who may also serve ex-officio on board committees (Bielefeld & Scotch, 1998; Jaskyte, 2017; Worth, 2020). Regular staff, volunteers, and nonprofit clients, in practical and traditional terms however, are often left out of the strategic decision-making matrix (Freund, 2017; Saxton, 2005).

However, there is a growing trend among nonprofits to explore shared governance in decision making (Freund, 2017; Routhieaux, 2015). As the literature notes, this can take many forms such as organizational restructuring to allow more staff and volunteer stakeholder input in the initial side of decision awareness, or may even involve inviting nonprofit clients to serve as board members or on short-term committees. This co-

creational or co-leadership mindset is admirable in nonprofit contexts, can build needed consensus, and can empower otherwise powerless stakeholders (Andrasik & Mead, 2019; Kissane, 2010).

Nonprofit organizations can have complex decision-making structures and processes; getting to yes or no can be challenging. However, the salience of clear mission, high board-executive trust, and broad consensus are valuable in modern nonprofit contexts as well as in the study of issues management processes.

Conceptualizing Publics and Stakeholders

Public relations scholars have traditionally delineated two distinct concepts when describing and segmenting the groups of people that are important to organizations. The concept of a *public* has a unique set of definitions and applications related specifically to public policy, public opinion, and traditional public relations; while the concept of a *stakeholder* has definitions and applications closely related to business-centric contexts. Some scholars have noted a trend to use these terms interchangeably as a type of synonym for the business term "audience," which may yield confusion or mismatch of theoretical and applied constructs (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Dhanesh, 2017; Mackey, 2006). While an exhaustive literature review of the question of public or stakeholder is not within the scope of this study, the following section will briefly define both terms, consider the challenges of interchangeable use, and will then consider reasons why the concept of a stakeholder has been duly chosen for the nonprofit context of this study. Finally, this section will, in conclusion, demonstrate the salient nonprofit stakeholders suggested by nonprofit public relations literature.

Publics

Although Grunig's influence and work with this concept is widely known, the definition of a public has 100-year-old roots (Grunig, 1983; Grunig & White,1992). According to Botan and Taylor (2004), Dewey (1927) demonstrated one of the earliest definitions of a public. "Dewey identified a public as a group of people who see they have a common interest with respect of an organization that endeavor to act through suitable structures and thus to organize itself for oversight and regulation" (p. 654). The definition given by Dewey is salient: that publics are basically self-organized interest groups.

This concept of publics, groups of commonly interested persons that self-organize around issues was further carried as a sociological construct by the likes of Lippmann (1946), and later expanded and conceptually codified classified by public relations pioneers such as Cutlip (1962). Grunig (1997) would later suggest that publics were categorized as either active or passive: "the more active the public, the more likely they were to have well-organized opinions and to use these opinions to guide their behaviors" (p. 5). Grunig (1997), building on this previous work, suggested that "publics, therefore, begin as disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems; but they can evolve into organized and powerful activist groups" (p. 9).

Grunig's situational theory of publics (STOPS) (1997), scaffolding on the aforementioned concepts, as well as his work with public relations excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), suggested that public involvement publics should have more than active or passive variables. With this thought in consideration, Grunig's STOPS theory suggested five variables to better understand and measure publics. The three independent

STOPS variables are problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement; the two dependents are information seeking and information processing. These five combined variables of STOPS were, and continue to be, used to measure the levels of a public's interaction with an organization (Grunig, 1997).

The combined and classic definitions of Dewey (1927), public relations excellence, and STOPS, provide the baseline for understanding a public, understanding and measuring relative levels of involvement of a public, conceptual two-way communication, and ultimately these concepts provide a conceptual framework for considering how and why groups of people interact with organizations. While these aforementioned concepts of a public have seen significant criticism (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Holtzhausen, 2000; Laskin, 2009; Pieczka, 2006; Pieczka, 2019), the concepts of a public and related theories have also seen significant expansion and scaffolding into new concepts such as dialogic engagement (Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). The concept of a *public* as a segmented group of people which are self-organized around issues, and as a group of people of which relative levels involvement can be measured, continues to be important today.

Stakeholders

While the concept of a public has roots in sociology and public opinion, the concept of a stakeholder has direct linkages to business constructs, and is a close cousin to the concept of a business shareholder or stockholder.

Freeman's (1984, 2010) conceptualizations provide needed clarity and a working definition: "corporations have stakeholders, that is, groups and individuals who benefit from or are harmed by, and whose rights are violated or respected by, corporate actions

(1984, p. 41). Key stakeholders, as defined by Freeman, are connected in varying levels of financial interdependence with the organization. Freeman's basic construct of key stakeholders denotes both internal and external stakeholders, with the corporation at the conceptual center. Freeman (1984) suggested that management, owners, employees were internal stakeholders with special rights and privileges; wherein customers, suppliers, and the local community were the external stakeholders with divergent rights and privileges. The relationships with stakeholders, in Freeman's early concepts, were built upon mutual exchange of resources and are primarily transactional, yet may also be tied to mutual corporation-stakeholder value creation and sustainability (Lee & Raschke, 2020).

It is essential to note that the duty of care of stakeholders was conceptualized by Freeman to fall on the management of the corporation, and further, that a modern corporation "shall be managed in the interests of its stakeholders" (Freeman, 1984, p. 47). Freeman further suggested that stakeholders "may bring an action against the directors for failure to perform the required duty of care" (1984, p. 48).

While some scholars might argue that the use of the term stakeholder is overtly organizational-centric and is potentially non-congruent with ideal public relations concepts (Dhanesh, 2017; Mackey, 2006), it is important to note that Freeman's work was in many ways, groundbreaking for the time: stakeholder theory suggested more democratic management for mutual interest of stakeholders. This concept, along with basic business concepts such as Carroll's pyramid (Carroll, 1991, 2016) demonstrate a conceptual and pragmatic shift of management and ownership views of, and elevated rights of, a variety of stakeholders.

While this concept of a stakeholder is tied to a corporate or organizational construct, this concept has seen, and continues to see, diverse applications and expansions into public relations literature. Three core areas of public relations research demonstrate this trend:

1) *The study of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which has deep roots in stakeholder concepts (Carroll, 1991, 2016), as well as continued modern application of these concepts, provides evidence of widespread usage:* (see for example: Aksak et al., 2016; Lim & Greenwood, 2017; White, 2015).
2) *The modern study of issues management and strategic issues management, which has moved away from a primarily public-centric conceptualization, and is currently showing trends of stakeholder concepts, provides yet another salient example; an example essential not only to public relations, but also to the concepts of important to this study directly:* (see for example: Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath, 2018a; Straub & Jonkman, 2017).
3) *The modern study of crisis and crisis communication is basically an organization- centric area of study, with stakeholder relationships and corporate reputations of primary concern*: (see for example: Coombs, 2004, 2007; Ma & Zhan, 2016; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Xu, 2018).

While these examples provide contemporary support for the use of stakeholder concepts in broad public relations research, the next section will consider how stakeholder concepts have been extended into a new research context: nonprofit public relations.

Stakeholders and Stakeholder Relationships in Nonprofit Public Relations

As the previous section suggested, stakeholder concepts are trending in many core and contemporary areas of public relations scholarship. The nonprofit public relations sector is no different, with stakeholder and stakeholder relationship perspectives demonstrating prominence. This trend is salient for three reasons: First, the nonprofit stakeholder literature is primarily framed with significant ties to three core, relationship-centric public relations theories. Second, the stakeholder perspective demonstrates a nonprofit organizational-centric conceptual pattern in a significant portion of the literature. And third, the current bloom in nonprofit public relations stakeholder studies allows for a literature-derived nominal taxonomy of nonprofit stakeholders. The following sections will briefly discuss these three important areas, and make a case for the extension of these concepts into the nonprofit context.

Public Relations Excellence

Public relations excellence has been recognized as the dominant paradigm and as the first functioning and systematic public relations theory (Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Macnamara, 2016; Pieczka, 2006). To build the theory, Grunig (1983) traced the roots of modern public relations to the practices of PT Barnum's circus pitches and Ivy Lee's tactical media writings. Beginning with these models of publicity and press agentry, Grunig (1983;1992) suggested that public relations later added the conceptual tactics of public information, similar to what is displayed by many government or university relations offices today.

Building on his observation of these historical practices, and on a significant dataset of professional practices and business-driven case studies Grunig (1983)

suggested that public relations was moving into a new era of influence tied to two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric communication models. These proposed concepts (Grunig & Grunig, 2008), with research underwriting of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), became the foundation of public relations excellence theory (Grunig, 1992).

Public relations excellence theory was then more fully operationalized in the early 1990s (Grunig, 1992), and as it developed, demonstrated an organizational-centric strategic messaging philosophy, focused on persuasion and organizational-public ideal or cause alignment (Van Riel, 2012), and the measurement of public relations systems outcomes (Grunig, 1992).

The variables considered in Grunig's early studies (1983), and the variables heavily tested in Western and cross-cultural contexts (Rhee, 2002; Vercic et al., 1996), were tied to organizational-focused outcome measures of public relations professional practice. As Grunig et.al., (2002) demonstrated, more than 20 original IABC factors have been simmered down to four key variables: the latent and understood professional presence direction of communication, purpose of communication, ethical or unethical communication, and mediated communication. Again, the call of excellence theory was to measure against an industry standard public relations ideal via systems output and outcomes. It was an argument and measurement against an industry standard of professional practice.

As such, public relations excellence demonstrated philosophical grounding in post-positivist empirical frames, the psychology of persuasion, and the pragmatic practice of systems-driven strategic and measurable outcomes (Laskin, 2009). Grunig's (1992)

new paradigm was an argument to bring public relations into corporate management communication and decision making, and his models and best practices were tested by business-language outcome metrics tied to organizational strategies and objectives.

It is salient to understand the paradigmatic shift of Grunig's work as it relates to how the publics were to be viewed, and how messages to these publics should be crafted. Grunig, and those that followed him, envisioned the corporation or organization as the center, the sender/creator in the meaning-making communication process. Grunig's (1992) two-way symmetrical communication frame idealized two-way communication between organizations and publics, but still focused on the corporate bottom line.

This organization-focused communication process has been a common point of critique of public relations excellence theory, with authors such as Pieczka (2006) and Laskin (2009) marking excellence as a "utopian ideal" (p. 45), a concept not fully practiced in the everyday industry. Botan and Taylor (2004) argued that public relations needed to grow beyond a functional systems perspective. Other critics have narrowed in on excellence theory's over-focus on consensus calling the concepts "novel thinking dissensus," and even "violent" (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95). Public relations excellence theory, argued the critics, was about business advocacy and business priorities, not about two-way true dialogue.

Despite the critics, Grunig's models and best practices demonstrated a potential paradigmatic shift in the public relations academy and field of practice. A line of influential scholars marked public relations excellence as the leader in public relations theory building (Botan, 1993). As Pasedeos et al. (1999) demonstrated in a bibliometric metastudy, public relations excellence was the most highly cited public relations model in

a 15-year review. Grunig's influence was not, and is not questioned.

From a pragmatic systems standpoint, public relations excellence continues to be taught, practiced, and theoretically extended in modern contexts. From the process driven ROPE or ROSIE formulas used to frame, build and measure public relations campaigns, to the practical applications oft-employed in public relations practices of alignment (Van Riel, 2012), empirical communication outcome and output measurement (Paine, 2011), or even data-driven crisis management (Coombs, 2007), public relations excellence has proven itself as a continual shaper of public relations research and practice. It is the foundation of modern public relations, and as we will discuss in later sections of this paper, is often employed for conceptual extension into nonprofit contexts.

Organizational Public Relationships (OPR)

While Grunig studied the systems and strategic management side of public relations, Ferguson asked the academy to consider the relationship side of public relations. In her 1984 AEJMC presentation, Ferguson denoted multiple professional shifts in public relations, but bemoaned the lack of public relations central theory, and clearly noted, for theory building and testing: "If I were to put my public relations theory development eggs in one basket, (relationships) would be it." (Ferguson, 1984, p.12). Ferguson, using Kuhn's (2012) language, called for a shift of thought among the paradigm communities of public relations (Ferguson, 1984). Ferguson suggested that this new paradigm focus on the relationship side of public relations as the unit of analysis, not on the organization or publics themselves (Ferguson, 1984; 2018). This salient difference of unit of analysis set the stage for a shift in public relations research, and opened the door for operationalization of this path towards new theoretical concepts (Cheng, 2018b).

As several key scholars (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Cheng, 2018a; Heath, 2013) would retrospectively suggest, the path opened by Ferguson brought a deluge of questions about how relationship concepts could be defined, measured, and manipulated…how could relationships in public relations be operationalized?

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) were the first to attempt this operationalization of relationship management, building on major concepts introduced by Ferguson, as well as scaffolding on the concepts of Grunig and Hunt (1984). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) suggested five key dimensions (or variables) that included: control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and exchange relationships. These variables, as Heath (2013) would later explain, demonstrated a complex mix of interpersonal and group communications roots, and as such, a connection to rhetorical traditions. This philosophical mooring in the narrative traditions is a glaring key indicator of an ideological shift in public relations, the very paradigm shift Ferguson had suggested.

Ledingham and Bruning's five dimensions would be tested by the original authors, and then expanded by other researchers such as Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) around the concepts of antecedents to relationships, clarified by Grunig and Huang (2000), and continued to demonstrate modern expansion in variable perspectives by scholars such as Yang and Taylor (2014) and Cheng (2018b).

Organization public relationships has clearly evolved over time, has been expanded and tested, and as Cheng's 2018 metastudy demonstrated, OPR has produced 156 highly ranked journal studies. Using Littlejohn and Foss' (2010) indicators of good theory (time, expansion, outcomes) OPR continues to demonstrate salient value.

While Heath (2013) or Botan and Taylor (2004) might suggest that OPR has rhetorical and interpersonal roots, Cheng's (2018b) metastudy clearly demonstrates that OPR has in the past, and continues to be tested empirically. Further, OPR, often together with a stakeholder viewpoint, has been heavily employed in nonprofit contexts (Sisco et al., 2013).

Dialogic and Dialogic Engagement

From management system outcomes to relationship variables, public relations theory has continued to evolve and scaffold upon previous ideas. Kent and Taylor (2002) began to conceptualize this ideological shift "from public relations reflecting an emphasis on managing communication, to an emphasis on communication as a tool for negotiating relationships" (p. 23).

Envisioning conceptual public relations as a form of negotiation, Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that new public relations theory should be viewed through interpersonal, rhetorical, and dialogical lenses.

Dialogue was tentatively defined by Kent and Taylor (2002) in traditional terms as meaning the relational exchange of interpersonal ideas between two parties. The authors noted that some scholars, such as Heath (2000), understood dialogue to be basically point/counterpoint, while others such as Grunig and White (1992) defined it more broadly to mean mediated conversations between organizations and publics.

With interpersonal dialogue at the root, the concept of dialogic was introduced, meaning a framework in which dialogue can occur (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Building on this dialogic mindset, Kent and Taylor (2002), noted that dialogic concepts are hard to operationalize but should include two-party mutually beneficial factors described as:

> mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics (p. 24-25).

In addition to the dialogic, interpersonal-focused concepts, Kent and Taylor also made engagement a key operational measure of true dialogical public relations. Engagement was conceptualized to mean "that publics are consulted and considered on matters that affect them" (2002, p. 27). This publics-first, or publics-centered engagement, defined in this early stage, demonstrated the foundation of what would later become the key operational landmarks of this model. This concept of dialogic engagement continued to develop over time and demonstrated expansion and application. Two marked conceptual applications are important for this study: co-creation focus and societal-level change.

First considered is the conceptualization of dialogic engagement as pushing the field towards a co-creational model of public relations. In their "state of the field" metastudy-like overview, Botan and Taylor (2004), suggested that public relations was shifting towards the receiver side of the equation, towards the public or stakeholder. Further Botan and Taylor (2004) suggested that this shift demonstrated a "transition from a functional perspective to a co-creational one" (p. 651). This co-creational mindset,

proposed the authors, focused on shared-meaning making with the publics, instead of seeing the publics and public relations process as a set of business-focused outcomes.

This key principle of co-creational focus, as Coombs and Holladay (2015) would later reflect, marked a shift towards the "social construction of reality" in public relations thought (p. 691). This link towards social construction demonstrated, in the opinion of Coombs and Holladay (2015), that this interpersonal dialogic engagement line of thought had ontological roots with the likes of Berger and Luckman (1966). This was indeed a paradigmatic shift in public relations scholarship.

In addition to co-creation with publics, another key principle of dialogic public relations was first operationalized in by Taylor and Kent in 2014 and then clarified in Johnston and Taylor in 2018. Proposed was the ideal top-level marker of dialogic public relations: societal level change.

Taylor and Kent (2014) envisioned dialogue on a continuum, with propaganda and monologue on one end of the spectrum and dialogue on the other end of the spectrum. True dialogue should be two-way, empathetic and listening-focused, noted the authors. This was the ideograph of dialogical engagement, and as such, synthesized previous concepts. This paradigmatic change, noted Taylor and Kent (2014), meant that "engagement is built upon the social capital that already exists between an organization and its stakeholders. The existence of social capital is both a precursor to engagement and also an outcome of engagement" (p. 396).

These two key conceptual ideas of dialogic engagement or dialogic-based public relations, co-creation and societal level change, can best be understood by considering the

demonstration of the three conceptual tiers of engagement as seen in Johnston and Taylor's (2018) summary which are (p. 1-17):

1) *low level (including indicators of activity and interactivity)*
2) *mid-level (including relationships qualities such as trust, reciprocity, credibility, legitimacy, openness and understanding)*
3) *higher level (including indicators of social embeddedness, social change and social awareness).*

Core Public Relations Theory Concepts: The Common Thread of Relationships

The overview of the development and core concepts of the aforementioned three public relations theory sets was detailed in the previous section to distill one essential consideration for this dissertation: public relations theory is, at its core, conceptualized around various definitions and measures of stakeholder *relationships*. Not only is this salient for public relations scholarship as a whole, but this recognition is essential as this study hinges on understanding issues management in light of nonprofit organization stakeholder relationships.

While there are salient conceptual differences in the three core public relations theories (and a multitude of derivative conceptual and extension studies), the argument can be made that the relationship construct is the thread that holds these public relations theories together. This concept of an essential relationship construct is not new or novel. A brief view of the literature demonstrates that many public relations scholars agree.

According to Macnamara (2016) "as early as the first edition of Cutlip and Center's public relations text, the establishment and maintenance of relationships have

been highlighted as a focus of public relations" (p. 147). This review has already highlighted Ferguson's (1984) call for relationships to be the center of public relations theory building. Heath (2000) suggested that public relations theory must be focused on the rhetorical and core communication principle of shared meaning, implying mutual participation by two parties in a relational construct. Taylor and Kent (2014), distilling key concepts from public relations excellence and OPR, suggested that the core ideas of all public relations theories included "taken for granted concepts of relationship, two-way communication, and the concept of engagement" (p. 384).

Macnamara (2016), also considering concepts from public relations excellence, OPR, and dialogic engagement, suggested that basic communication and mutually respectful relations were prevalent in all public relations theory. To make his case, Macnamara (2016) quoted Baxter (2010) noting "…relationships are, by nature, two-way interactions and exchanges grounded in reciprocity and dialogue" (p. 149). Finally, it is the contemporary argument that relationship constructs are basically the essential building blocks for communication theory that applies conceptual impetus to this short argument for an underlying relationship core in public relations theory, including theoretical concepts of engagement. Johnson and Taylor (2018) noted:

> Much of engagement is situated within a relational setting—with actors represented by their interests, motivations, world views, and power characteristics. Within engagement definitions, key actors in the relationship are recognized as organizations, stakeholders, consumers, employees, community, users, partners, parties, social institutions, and so on; each operating within a distinct or discrete social setting (p. 2).

Therefore, regardless of the public relations theory at hand: public relations excellence, OPR, or dialogic engagement (and other theories and models not considered here), the argument can be made that a relationship conceptual construct is the common thread in public relations theory development, and as the next section will demonstrate, that the stakeholder relationship construct is prevalent and pragmatic in nonprofit contexts.

Stakeholder Relationship Perspectives in Nonprofit Public Relations

The overarching conceptual relationship construct, regardless of public relations theoretical frame, has been at the core of nonprofit public relations research for almost 40 years. This relationship construct has proven both conceptually and practically extendable into a variety of nonprofit contexts. There is consensus among scholars that Kelly was the pioneer in this vein of research (Cho, 2012; Pressgrove & Waters, 2019; Sisco et al., 2011); two of Kelly's early studies will be briefly considered here.

Starting with conceptual and practical work in charitable organization fundraising practices, Kelly (1995) built the conceptual foundation for what would soon be a significant area of nonprofit public relations research. Kelly's study, using measures tied to the basic tenants of public relations excellence, demonstrated that a large portion of contemporary nonprofits were using a one-way propaganda-like approach to fundraising, contrary to Grunig's ideal two-way relationship driven constructs.

Building on her previous research, Kelly (2001) suggested that ideal two-way donor relationships were attainable by using basic and tactical donor stewardship principles and processes. Using a mix of Grunig's basic public relations excellence concepts, as well as employing a growing body of research tied to OPR concepts and

variables, Kelly suggested that reciprocity and relationship nurturing were key concepts of donor relationship building via donor stewardship tactics. Her conceptual expansion of these core public relations theories, as well as practical application to nonprofit donor relationship practice, through what she called the ROPE(S which is adding stewardship process) is often cited and well known.

Kelly's seminal work provided a salient nonprofit stakeholder relationship research pattern that continues to be seen among modern nonprofit public relations scholars: a significant preliminary understanding of nonprofit stakeholder management and public relations challenges or problems; extension of public relations theoretical constructs and models into the context to address the challenges and problems; and finally, a heavy focus on avenues and applications for nonprofit public relations stakeholder relationship practice.

This pattern of nonprofit stakeholder relationship research continues to be seen among modern scholarship. In metastudy of nonprofit public relations literature, Sisco et al. (2013) denoted that relationship-related theories were the most commonly chosen frames, and that there was a bloom of these relationship-related theoretical studies tied to growth in nonprofit public relations practice. Further, in 2019, Pressgrove and Waters suggested that relationships with stakeholders was "perhaps the most robust area of theory-based scholarship in nonprofit public relations" (p. 194).

Examples of this continuing pattern include the growing body of work from Cho who, building on Kelly's work, has considered individual and corporate donor stakeholders through an OPR lens (Cho, 2012; Cho & Kelly, 2014); stakeholder social media communication via PR excellence and dialogic engagement lenses (Cho & Auger,

2017; Cho & Schweickart, 2014); and a recent study considering undergraduate university students as potential philanthropic donor stakeholders (Cho et al., 2019). Further examples include stakeholder relationship studies tied to volunteers, internal stakeholders, and grantors (Auger, 2014a; Bortree & Waters, 2014; Bortree & Waters, 2008; Waters et al., 2013); as well as a significant body of literature on relationship empowerment and shared governance with nonprofit clients (Cohen, 2009; Freund, 2017; LeRoux, 2009a; Routhieaux, 2015; Saxton, 2005).

A Preliminary Taxonomy of Nonprofit Stakeholders

This bloom of research further allows for preliminary demarcation of nonprofit stakeholders. LeRoux (2009), extended Freeman's stakeholder concepts, and provided a preliminary listing of nonprofit stakeholders in three broad categories: various private and organizational funders (donors), clients (the customers of a nonprofit), and board (the governance of nonprofits). Manetti and Taccafondi (2014) added the categories of partner organizations, the local community, as well as the internal stakeholders of employees and volunteers to the list. The combined listings of these studies can be seen in Table 2.1.

While these early listings are not exhaustive, it is important to note that donor stakeholders have been the group most studied in nonprofit public relations, with clients and volunteers following (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019). Nonprofit decision makers (board and managers) are not broadly studied from a stakeholder and public relations perspective.

Table 2.1: Literature Suggested Types of Nonprofit Stakeholders

Type	**Authors**	**Year**
Donors	LeRoux	2009
Clients	LeRoux	2009
Board	LeRoux	2009
Partner Organizations	Manetti & Taccafondi	2014
Local Community	Manetti & Taccafondi	2014
Employees	Manetti & Taccafondi	2014
Volunteers	Manetti & Taccafondi	2014

Conceptual and Practical Reasons for a Stakeholder Perspective

It can be argued that the choice of stakeholder vs. public is a question of perspective, a question of unit of analysis, and a question of previous scholarship practice. For the purposes of this study a *stakeholder* perspective was chosen for three central reasons.

First, there is the question of perspective. Freeman's (1984) concepts and models view the organizational-stakeholder relationship from the inside out, with the organization being central to the equation. This dissertation follows Freeman, as it investigates how the organization creates both relationship and flows of information with internal and external groups. Second, from a unit of analysis standpoint, the driving questions and resulting data in this dissertation are sourced from a nonprofit decision-maker's perspective. This research therefore further follows the work of Freeman (1984) which suggests that the management has responsibility to care for and understand its stakeholders. Finally, as the previous literature has demonstrated, nonprofit scholars are employing a stakeholder conceptualization in the majority of their studies. This research chooses to follow this well-trodden path.

Issues Management in a Nonprofit Context: Holes and Opportunities

This overview of issues and issues management has demonstrated the significant history and continued expansion of the ideas and concepts reviewed above. While there is no issues management theory per se, there are defined models and tested theoretical systems approaches which have been applied and understood in corporate contexts for almost 40 years.

Five considerations arise within this nonprofit context. First, the unit of analysis is integral to this study: nonprofit decision makers are the managers of nonprofits (internal stakeholders) who are also, to synthesize Freeman (1984), responsible for the wellbeing of other stakeholders. These decision-making stakeholders and their intimate perspectives are the unit of analysis of this study. The literature herein demonstrates the benefits of a stakeholder perspective; while nonprofit decision makers (board members and managers) are noted as important stakeholders in the literature, there is no known public relations or nonprofit literature that considers their perspective on issues management. Further, this study is also interested in the communication process among nonprofit stakeholders. In other words, how are nonprofit decision makers (board members and managers) considering other salient stakeholders in the issues management process.

Second, from a systems standpoint, there are no known studies that consider a process-driven approach of how nonprofits manage issues. In light of Botan and Heath (2015), there is no study of the *flow of information* on salient issues in nonprofit organizations. No known studies have considered how and if Jones and Chase's seminal process model has any relevance in the nonprofit context.

Third, from an issues management and engagement lens, there are no known conceptual or applied studies that consider how and if nonprofit stakeholders are engaged internally or externally in the issues management process. Is there, as Taylor and Kent (2014) have suggested, a push for *propinquity* in nonprofit issues management? No scholar has asked this question; it should be appropriately explored.

Fourth, from a modern conceptualization of issues management as defined by Heath (2018a) and Coombs and Holladay (2018), do nonprofits feel pressured to engage

in modern social-driven issues, that may rise and fall with a rapidly shifting public perception on trending social media or traditional media? Do nonprofits feel tied by their 501c3 status, therefore wary of taking a side? Why or why not? While there is a thin line of study on nonprofit advocacy, this vein of work is in its infancy and does not approach advocacy from an issues-management standpoint.

Finally, from a crisis management perspective, there are no known studies that consider how and if nonprofits view issues management in conjunction with crisis management. Do nonprofits see crisis management holistically, with issues management as an important and crisis prevention or avoidance tool?

Research Questions

RQ1 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, how are issues identified, evaluated, integrated and communicated?

RQ2 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, what roadblocks exist in the strategic issues management process?

RQ3 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, how are nonprofit stakeholders (internal and external) involved in the strategic issues management process?

RQ4 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, does strategic issues management help prevent or mitigate crises?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview of The Methods

This dissertation is approaching the research questions of chapter two via three important perspectives. First, this dissertation is employing an overarching post-positivist ontological paradigm. Second, understanding a need for data in a previously unexplored phenomenon, this dissertation is using epistemological assumptions and tools related to the lived experience of the respondents. Finally, this dissertation is applying the tested qualitative tools of thematic analysis for data assessment. This mixing of ontological assumptions and epistemological techniques is not novel, follows proven patterns, and can be seen in the modern work of scholars in this researcher's own mentor network, as well as among various nonprofit scholars on a national and international scope. These salient philosophical underpinnings will be discussed in detail in the following pages.

A national convenience sample of 22 nonprofit decision makers consisting of CEOs, directors, and board members were interviewed for this study. Sample distinctives and respondent interview collection processes will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Ontological Underpinning of the Method: Post-Positivism

The post-positivist paradigm has ontological connection to the work of philosopher Karl Popper. While Popper (1963) rejected rigid empiricism common in traditional scientific inquiry, he did not throw out reason per se (as critical scholars would later do) (Schaeffer, 1968), but instead built out a complex system of falsification in areas such as science, math, politics, and theology (Popper, 1963). Popper suggested that even the traditional sciences approach research inquiry with presuppositional prejudice.

Herein, Popper (1963), and later Kuhn (2012), would suggest, in practical terms, there is a *philosophy of science*. While modern post-positivists use a variety of tools, Popper and Kuhn's concepts provide a pathway for using a theoretical-driven ontology mixed with diverse epistemological and human lived-experience phenomenological tools.

Practically, post-positivists are researchers who "value a scientific approach to explaining social phenomena, but who also accept many of the criticisms of the different positivisms, and have developed positions that transcend them" (Corman, 2005, p. 21). To that end, the epistemological assumptions of post-positivists researchers using a phenomenological perspective, noted Lindlof and Taylor (2017 p. 9-10), may include core presuppositions such as:

1) *communication occurs as humans interact in patterned ways.*
2) *our knowledge of communication is best developed by search for casual explanations for its observed patterns.*
3) *absolute truth and completely value-free inquiry may be unattainable in communication research.*
4) *in studying communication phenomena, researchers should document, preserve, and account for the emic (ordinary, lived, and felt) experiences of social actors.*

Practical Examples of Post-Positivists Scholars Using a Qualitative Perspective

Practical examples of post-positivist communication scholars using qualitative tools to understand phenomena or explain a process include work from McMillan, whose team used focus groups to consider health care cultures among Appalachian women. (McMillan et al., 2007). McMillan's research perspective for the study proposed that

"people are active meaning makers, and the realities of any phenomenon are created by those that live the experience-such as breast health. The research should allow participants to freely express their 'realities' of breast health" (p. 38).

Another example can be seen in the work of White, who used a theory-informed set of research questions and a traditional post-positivist approach, but also employed open-ended interviews and qualitative data analysis to explore a sense of community among university employees (White et al., 2010). White's introduction to the study noted that "qualitative approaches are preferrable when the goal of the research is to understand a process or phenomenon" (p. 66).

A third example can be noted in a group of agriculture education and communication scholars, as they considered the lived experiences of Australian women as production agricultural leaders. This study, conceived by a set of researchers that traditionally approach research from various ontological and epistemological perspectives, demonstrated a deep dive into the reflective journeys of five Australian women, but also employed traditional leadership and social learning theory frames to help interpret the data (Stephens et al., 2018). "A phenomenological approach was utilized to gain entry into the conceptual world of the women in order to understand how and what meaning they construct from their lived childhood experiences, adulthood personal and work experiences, and leadership experiences" (p. 272).

These three examples demonstrate mixed approaches concerning procedural or cultural phenomena, an influence of theory, yet a deep reliance on the vocality and lived experiences of participants. This pattern of proven post-positivist scholars borrowing qualitative tools can also be seen in salient research among nonprofit public relations

scholars including the work of Sisco, who has repeatedly used variant forms of qualitative analysis to answer pressing theory-informed research questions regarding nonprofit crisis management and nonprofit perception (see for example: Sisco, 2012; Sisco et al., 2010). Further, Auger's work has also demonstrated qualitative epistemological patterns in various studies tied to nonprofit stakeholder relationships and rhetorical message framing (Auger, 2014a,b). Finally, Waters has also employed qualitative tools in various nonprofit studies, including studies with social media and public perception (Waters, 2010). Sisco, Auger, and Waters each demonstrate a salient pattern which includes a theory-driven set of research questions, significant qualitative data, and proven qualitative tools for analysis.

The Phenomenological Tradition: Lived Experience

The concepts and traditions of phenomenology are focused upon approaching and analyzing data from the viewpoint and lived experience of the participant (Apuke, 2017; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Phenomenology is simply "the study of the lifeworld, the recognition that the reality of each individual is different and individual actions can only be understood through understanding the lifeworld of individuals and also their shared perspectives" (Daymon & Holloway, 2010 p. 183). Therefore, following this tradition, the frameworks of this dissertation are influenced by the overarching epistemological concepts of scholars that champion a phenomenological-based approach: scholars focused on proven data discovery and sample selection concepts, scholars focused on the quality of qualitative data, and scholars focused on proven data analysis concepts.

Data Discovery Concepts

This dissertation followed the proven paths of data discovery primarily through the work of Lindlof and Taylor. First, this study used Lindlof and Taylor's (2017) framework which suggests that strong qualitative research first begins with a rationale, that may include, along with other elements, a salient study of "cultural variation of a communication phenomenon (that) has not been well documented or explained" (p. 165). The driving question of this nonprofit issues management dissertation has scant if any previous research, is relatively unexplored, and therefore provides a congruent fit to Lindlof and Taylor's framework.

With the rationale noted, the question of appropriate tools was then considered. Since this study was asking a question of process and perception, questions of "lived experience" of the nonprofit decision makers, focusing on the "nature of a person's experience, worldview, or ideological affiliation to result in words and sentiments that can only be uttered by someone who has *been there*" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 223), it was determined that a semi-structured instrument would be most fitting. The semi-structured instrument allows for a congruent structured approach to all participants, but also allows the researcher to vary the question order, ask probing or follow-up questions, and promote genuine dialog between the researcher and participant (Stacks et al., 2011). "A qualitative interview is essentially a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and then peruses specific topics raised by the respondent" (Babbie, 2020, p. 320). This type of respondent interview using a semi-structured instrument further follows the well-trodden path of Lazerfield (1944, p. 51) who suggested that respondent interviews should have goals that include:

1) to clarify meanings of a respondent's answer

2) to single out the decisive elements of an opinion

3) to discern influences

4) to classify complex attitude patterns

5) to interpretate motivations

The instrument developed for this study pointedly focused on respondents' perceptions and opinions that mirror Lazerfield's concepts 1, 2, & 4 closely, and in many ways asked question 5 repeatedly. This question of why a nonprofit decision maker acted in a certain way was repeatedly demonstrated on the instrument and in follow-on probing questions.

Sample Selection Concepts

Onweugbuzie and Collins (2007) provided a framework for sample selection in qualitative studies. The authors suggested that convenience samples can be valid when the goal is "not to generalize to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals or events…the researcher then purposively selects individuals, groups, and settings in this phase that maximize understanding of the underlying phenomenon" (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007, p. 287). Further, Onweugbuzie and Collins suggested that the ideal sample size for phenomenological research should be greater than 10: not too small to make for difficult analysis, but not too large that "it is difficult to undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis" (p. 289). Finally, Onweugbuzie and Collins suggested, scaffolding on research from previous authors, that a correctly chosen sample can bring about "interpretative validity," a concept that implies that a strong interpretation and voicing from participants may bring understanding to a larger underlying group. The

sample selected for this dissertation directly follows this philosophy, using a mainly homogenous group of nonprofit decision makers to promote a depth of understanding, demonstrating a significant sample size, and employing an interpretative validity.

Quality of Qualitative Research Concepts

Tracy (2010) provided a pragmatic framework for conceptual qualitative research quality. Tracy outlined eight "big tent" criteria for excellence in qualitative research. These criteria demonstrated by Tracy (2010, p. 840), include these salient concepts:

1) worthy topic

2) rich rigor

3) sincerity

4) credibility

5) resonance

6) significant contribution

7) ethical

8) meaningful coherence.

For the concept of worthy topic, this dissertation employed the suggested hallmarks of a timely and relevant topic as the issues management process in nonprofits has never before been addressed by the academy. For the concept of rich rigor, Tracy suggested that theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, and data collection and analysis processes would strengthen a study. This study, by first considering the basic concepts of well-tested business-related issues management constructs and theories as a starting point, met Tracy's suggestion that a strong qualitative study be shaped by existing theories and models.

Data and time in the field were also found significant in this dissertation research, with over 30 hours of recordings and 250 pages of transcripts. Although the data were collected via Zoom, six-eight weeks were spent in the data collection process, in addition to more than 30 years of lived experience by the researcher in this human service nonprofit space. Finally, proven analysis processes were used, as well as several digital tools to ensure quality of the analysis.

Sincerity and credibility, as outlined by Tracy (2010), were tied, in this dissertation, to tenants such as self-reflexivity and member descriptions/multivocality. First, the member descriptions and vocality are demonstrated as an essential part of the data analysis of this study. Second, this study by default is shaped by the self-reflexive previous work of this researcher in this nonprofit space. It should be noted that the author of this dissertation has more than 30 years' of experience in nonprofit line staff, executive, and board leadership. This viewpoint suggests a level of subjectivity, but this depth of experience also speaks to the sincerity and credibility of this study.

Resonance is defined by Tracy as "transferrable findings," a concept that this research hopes to retest for this quality measure in future studies. Finally, the last three concepts outlined by Tracy are mainly procedural and include: significant contribution (practically and morally), ethical (procedural ethics with human subjects), and meaningful coherence (achieves what the study purports to be about), in essence a question of internal validity. This study's significant contribution has not only the potential for academic conceptual expansion into new contexts, but also has an element of marked pragmatism, in a similar fashion as can be seen Kelly, who spent her career at Florida contextualizing and testing public relations concepts in the nonprofit context, not

just theoretically, but also in such a way that nonprofit public relations practitioners might benefit (for example, Kelly's ROPES process for nonprofit fundraising promoted pragmatic avenues for donor stewardship) (Kelly, 2001; Waters, 2008).

The procedural ethics for this study, as recommended by Tracy, were governed by the committee and the University of Tennessee Intuitional Review Board (IRB), and these procedures were followed with due diligence. The final recommendation of coherence mirrors similar questions in the qualitative conceptual worlds about internal validity. In this light, this study, with careful oversight by the committee and chair, crafted an instrument and method focused on answering the RQ's at hand without collecting potentially spurious or superfluous data.

Data Collection

The recruiting of participants of this study was approved by the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board prior to interviews being conducted. The instrument, consent form, and IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C respectively. A convenience sample of participants was recruited from a national population of nonprofit decision makers. Since this researcher has more than 30 years of experience in nonprofit public relations, operations, executive management, and board service areas, an understanding of this sector and a network of salient decision makers was convenient and accessible.

Therefore, starting from the researcher's own network and working outward through recommendations from new connections, nonprofit decision makers (CEOs, directors, and board members) were contacted via email and asked to sit for semi-structured Zoom interviews. To promote congruity of the sample, nonprofit decision

makers were selected from organizations in the human service or religious sectors of nonprofit organizations.

Once the nonprofit decision makers agreed to participate in this study, and in keeping with the IRB requirements, these decision makers were emailed appropriate IRB forms along with a cover letter that described basic definitions of issues management.

When an agreed time for the interview was secured, the researcher used University of Tennessee assigned and encrypted Zoom links to ensure privacy, and emailed the secure links to the participant. Upon opening the Zoom call, and in alignment with the IRB requirements, the researcher explained the previously shared informed consent form, including core components of privacy, anonymity, and data security. The participants deciding to proceed gave verbal consent to participate, as well as verbal consent to be recorded. Interviews varied in time from forty minutes to two hours.

The interviews were originally captured and processed to .mp3 files via Zoom recordings, and then the .mp3 files were sent to *rev.com* for primary transcription. Each transcript was then visually and auditorily rescanned and cleaned for missed words or regional vocalizations/accents not accurately picked up by the digital transcription service.

The combined interviews yielded more than 30 hours of recordings and 250 pages of transcribed data. In addition to interview data, basic information about the participants' associated nonprofit organizations, budgets, and scope of work was collected from publicly available sources such as the organization's website, organizational annual reports, and IRS form 990 (publicly available via the IRS website or through web-based conglomerators such as *Guidestar).*

Sample

A total of 22 individuals were interviewed for this study over a six-to-eight-week period. A majority of the respondents represented human service or religious organizations which were focused on food, clothing, and/or shelter as a *primary mission*. This majority group included local and regional foodbanks, housing-focused organizations, and food-justice related nonprofit micro farming operations. A minority group of the respondents represented human service or religious organizations which were focused on women and children's services of various types (domestic abuse, sexual and reproductive health, drug rehab), but which also had a *significant mission* of food, clothing, and/or shelter focus or referral process.

An attempt was made to recruit a blend of both executive-level leaders and board members, which was achieved by a near 60-40 mix. Further, this convenience sample demonstrated an interesting mix of 13 male and nine female participants from various parts of the country. The participants' nonprofit organizations also demonstrated diverse budget categories (which were assigned nominal categories). Table 3.1 summarizes the sample distinctives and also denotes the related participant pseudonyms.

Table 3.1: Participant Profile

No	Pseudonym	M/F	Annual Budget	Board/Exec	Location
1	Juan	M	$5-10 Million	Exec	West Coast
2	Peter	M	$1-500K	Exec	East Coast
3	Martha	F	$500K-1 Million	Exec	Central US
4	Jeff	M	$1-5 Million	Board	Central US
5	Janet	F	$1-5 Million	Board	Central US
6	Patricia	F	$1-500K	Board	East Coast
7	David	M	$500K-1 Million	Exec	Central US
8	Richard	M	$5-10 Million	Exec	Central US
9	Weston	M	$1-500K	Board	Central US
10	Joyce	F	$1-5 Million	Exec	Central US
11	Eden	F	$1-500K	Exec	Central US
12	Paul	M	$500K-1 Million	Board	Central US
13	Zena	F	$500K-1 Million	Exec	East Coast
14	Phil	M	$1-500K	Exec	East Coast
15	Jarvis	M	$1-500K	Board	West Coast
16	Bo	M	$1-500K	Exec	Central US
17	Orville	M	$1-500K	Board	Central US
18	Charles	M	$1-5 Million	Board	Central US
19	Bonita	F	$500K-1 Million	Exec	West Coast
20	Doug	M	$500K-1 Million	Exec	Central US
21	Lisa	F	$5-10 Million	Exec	Central US
22	Bettye	F	$1-500K	Exec	Central US

Data Analysis

At the recommendation of past and present scholars, this study employed the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015) as the primary guides for thematic data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that salient thematic qualitative analysis must start with the decision of whether the data will be analyzed in an inductive or bottom-up way or whether the data will be analyzed in a theoretical or deductive top-down way. Approach two, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) "tends to be driven…by an analytic interest in the area" and suggests that the researcher will "code for a quite specific research question, which maps onto the more theoretical approach" (2006, p. 84). This study, for both ontological and epistemological reasons discussed at the first of this chapter, chose to follow Braun and Clarke's second path of theory driven and research-question tied analysis, which will be readily evident in the results section.

Therefore, the process by which the data analysis was approached followed the path set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) in six distinct phases:

Step 1: familiarizing yourself with the data

Step 2: generation of initial codes

Step 3: searching for themes

Step 4: reviewing themes

Step 5: defining themes

Step 6: producing the report

This process, and the application of this process, will be explored more fully in the following paragraphs.

First, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), the process of data familiarization includes aspects such as transcribing, reading, re-reading the data, and noting down initial ideas. This researcher followed three distinct steps in data immersion and familiarization. First, at the end of each Zoom call, the researcher noted initial ideas on paper. A process of categorizing and organizing these side notes proved to be a salient part of understanding and contextualizing each interview (Emerson et al., 2011). Second, the transcription process involved a web-based service, but after the service provided initial transcriptions, interviews were then auditorily rechecked against the Zoom .mp3 recordings. This process allowed for a synergy of hand-written notes and initial comparison with the transcript. Finally, before any other steps were taken, and with the research questions in mind, printed paper transcripts were highlighted for preliminary evidence of significant data.

Step two involved generation of initial codes. As Braun and Clarke (2006) noted, this process should include "coding interesting features in the data in a systematic way" (p. 87). For this study, the richest interview transcripts were loaded into NVivo software which allowed for code creation, cross-data coding, cross-data constant code comparison, and cross-data evidence collection. This initial set of NVivo codes was then used as a working digital codebook, which allowed additional hand and digital coding transcript by transcript across the remaining data. At this stage of initial analysis and coding, 27 codes were demonstrated in NVivo's project screen and database.

Step three, also following Braun and Clarke (2006), involved a collation and synthesis process, where initial themes were considered, and collapsed as needed based on similar definition or resemblance. The NVivo software's code visualizations assisted

in this theme generation process. A combination of visual NVivo outputs and paper copies of the transcripts were used in this step to note instances where themes had similar roots, and to help in the decision process of collapsing related themes.

Steps four and five, further followed Braun and Clarke (2006), and involved the process of solidifying themes and creating a thematic map of the analysis with the aid of NVivo. This process was aided by both software and "copy-and-paste" work with the paper transcripts. As themes began to be evident and demonstrate saturation and dominance, these themes were given working names, related to or sourced directly from the respondent interview data.

Step six involved the reporting of data, the finalization of thematic relationship or "mind mapping," and the final analysis of selected extracts as they, in the words of Braun and Clarke, "related back to the research questions and literature" (p.87). NVivo also assisted in this restitching or reassembly process with graphs and screen visualizations that demonstrated how the themes and related codes clustered, as well as how these clusters were related to the research questions of the dissertation.

In a final check of quality before the final report was produced, NVivo was asked to produce a visualization that compared the usage of each interview source transcript file to final code and theme generation. The NVivo weighted chart demonstrated a relatively balanced usage of respondents voices, and provided a visual confirmation of study multivocality.

The final thematic analysis was therefore guided by Braun and Clarke's six steps, and aided by NVivo's ability to assist with initial coding, the building of a digital codebook, considering initial themes, collapsing themes, demonstrating emergent themes

by weight and pattern, and finally in restitching the emergent themes back together to answer the research question of this study for the final report. NVivo proved to be a valuable tool for consistency in analysis, visualization of data relationships, and compliance with desired qualitative research quality standards.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview of the Findings

Following the methods discussion in the previous chapter, the analysis of the respondent interviews was influenced by Braun and Clarke's (2006) conceptual suggestion that qualitative paradigm research may approach coding in a way that keeps specific research questions in mind, and which maps findings in pathways tied to existing theory. Further, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) and Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield's (2015) suggestions for step-by-step qualitative data analysis, the richest interviews were initially coded to help form a functional digital codebook in NVivo, then as additional interviews were added, the codes were constantly compared and condensed. These condensed codes began to form repeated emergent themes, which were then analyzed for connection and relationship. In a final stage, related themes were collapsed, named, and ranked by emergent prominence.

Six themes and related subthemes emerged from this final analysis, and will be considered in this chapter in order of prominence: 1) mission and values, 2) optics, 3) inputs, 4) CEO as issues leader, 5) trust, and 6) warning signs. These themes and their related subthemes can be seen in Table 4.1. Following in-depth consideration of these emergent themes, the final section of this chapter will consider how the emergent findings provided answers to the research questions of this dissertation.

Table 4.1: Emergent Themes and Related Subthemes

Main Theme	**Related Subthemes**
Mission and Values	Faith and Religion, Staying in Your Lane
Optics	Social Stance or Action
Inputs	Coalitions, Professional Groups, For-Profit Partners, Staff and Clients
CEO as Issues Leader	
Trust	
Warning Signs	

Emergent Themes

Mission and Values

Mission and values were top of mind for the respondents of this study in all conversations and in all stages of issues management process considerations. These mission and values concepts were often demonstrated early in the conversations as the respondents described what made their respective organizations unique, and then were often noted again as the decision

makers considered organizational stories and discussed how the nonprofit prioritized issues- related decisions.

Food and clothing executive director Martha described how her organization was different than a business and how that shaped the day-to-day operations:

> I think no matter whether you're a nonprofit or profit… you have to have that mission statement. That purpose statement would be what it would be…in a secular world; mission statement for us. But you've got to know what your core values are that you want to remain intact, regardless of who is your leadership. That this is our foundation. This is what we believe. And this is what we're going to base everything we do every day…this is who we are.

Martha's words were echoed by food and clothing board chairman Jarvis who pointed to mission and values as ways to center the organization, regardless of the issue at hand:

> Your mission is the most important safeguard that you have…your values is (are) what help to flesh out the mission and those objectives, the values that you actually put into place to shape your organization…I want to make sure that

> people are saying good things out there and help people think through complex issues, but at the end of the day, are you about the work?

Faith and Religion. The nonprofit decision makers of this study often suggested that the mission and values of their respective organizations were tied to faith or religion. Women and children's services CEO Doug noted that core faith values trumped business values:

> A lot of non-profits want to become Amazon. They want to become the business leaders. And, my biggest issue with that, especially for a ministry nonprofit, I haven't been called to be a business leader, I've been called to minister. And so that means that we're going to spend money differently. That means that… the climate…the environment of our workplace is going to look different. That means we're going to love our staff in a different way. We're going to love those that we serve in a different way.

This concept of faith values shaping the mission of the organization was also noted in the perspective of several board members, including food and clothing board member Jeff:

> The main thing (our organization) does is feed hungry people. That's sort of at the heart of the mission. But you know, if you ask anybody that works there, what they want to do is provide spiritual nourishment as much as physical nourishment…and most people that are our customers come to the soup kitchen, and they are physically fed. But within the walls of that soup kitchen, there's showers, there's laundry…and there's also a chapel, where at every meal, they hold a church service, and it's part of that spiritual nourishment.

This faith-based-mission was echoed by other decision makers that used words like “compassion,” “serving Christ,” “social gospel,” and “Jesus.” Repeatedly throughout the data, the decision makers made clear that faith values were important to many of the represented organizations. Nonprofit farm board member Orville summarized this theme well: “so this is not a group of people who are looking for money or fame, we’re in it because we’re serving, we’re serving Christ.”

Staying in Your Lane. The concept of staying in the lane and staying on mission was prominent among the respondents as they discussed issues management.

Food and clothing board chair Janet related a story in which she and the CEO walked through the practical outworking of complex social issues with a minority staff member:

> I said, you know, she's thinking specifically about the race issues. And I said, so what about the political issues? And what about the socioeconomic issues? I said, we live in a place where, you know, the divisiveness politically is just as strong as the race. And I told her, I said…if someone comes in wearing a Confederate flag shirt, are you not gonna serve them? And she was like, well, I'd rather not. And I'm like, well, that's not an option. I said, we treat everyone the same, no matter what they're wearing.

Women and children’s nonprofit CEO Bettye was clear on her motives and mission:

> I have no platform. And the reason that is, is number one, if you were to ever… in any sort of way campaign or be seen during this…that I could lose the 501c3 license that we have, you can lose that. A lot of people don't even know it. But the other reason, is I never want to leave anybody out. So, I feel like for us to do what

> we do well for one thing is to stay on mission. There's nothing in my mission statement that talks about changing people's minds or being rude to people.

It was women and children's CEO Zena who best summarized what many were saying: regardless of the issue, staying in your lane, staying on mission, helped keep the organization focused:

> So there are some great groups that lobby and track legislation and do grassroots activism, and that's their lane. You know, our lane is, is not necessarily political advocacy, it's direct service delivery. And so, there is this balance of not being perceived as drifting outside of your lane. And I've had to be very cognizant of that just with my own background and interests (so) that we don't skew too much.

Optics

In addition to mission and values, the next prominent theme combined repeated concepts of organizational optics, perceptions, and communication. The respondents of this study were attentive to how their issues management processes impacted the perceptions of partners, donors, and the general public.

Farm-based nonprofit board member Orville described how a concern about partner perceptions helped shape board decisions about diversity:

> So our director introduced that (the concept of board diversity) about nine months ago. We've had nine months to ingest that, think about that. And we are going to have the first female board member beginning January 1. God didn't tell us we had to put a female on the board, we had to think through…hey, if we're going to be responsive to the state (and the Commissioner of Agriculture), live on their property, then we have to at least think about how they look, their optics look, so

that we, the board, we're going to have to change. We want a lady on the board? Well, maybe not, maybe, yes. But the answer (from our) executive director (was that) you need to have diversity.

Women's shelter CEO Joyce relayed a story about an issue that divided her staff, her state nonprofit coalition, and potentially the local police force whom she relied on for client referrals and intake. She described her perception challenge:

> The latest, I think example is of course the Black Lives Matter and defunded police and all of those things. The (regional nonprofit) coalition put out a letter that they wanted us all to sign onto and man…and reading…I thought there was no way I can sign on to this. And if I don't sign on to it, I'm going to be looking like I'm not supportive of Black Lives Matter. And if I do sign onto it, we're going to look like we're defunding the police… and oh my gosh, it was this big deal. And so how we handle that as a, just continue to bring it before the board, where do we land? How does this affect our staff? How does it affect our clients? I contacted our police chief and I just said, okay, this is what's happening. And his words to me were: "You sign that letter and it's going to be a wound that never heals between us and them, your program and the police side." I've got several African American staff that are saying, you know, this is really hard for us and where are we on this? This is where we went. I abstained from the vote at the policy level…with the true belief that they had tried to throw the kitchen sink in that letter.

This optics and perception concept was also noted in how farm director Peter summarized how his organization worked to advance food-related social issues within an

umbrella state and national-level religious hierarchy, without causing perception problems that could threaten future funding of their essential in-network partners:

> The decision to do it (start a new farm organization) within the institution (national religious hierarchy), but not in spite of, or to spite the institution would like, we didn't get up and start bad mouthing the hand that fed us…right? So in that sense, you know, we weren't Jesus, like we didn't march into Jerusalem and turn the temple upside down…right? We leveraged the temple to our advantage.

Social Stance or Action. The decision makers of this study were also cognizant of how issues management impacted their organization's public perceptions in regard to social issues, often driven by social media trends. The data suggested that the respondents were divided down observed experiential lines on how and when they should engage these issues; and also divided on whether they should lead out on social issues with social and digital media stances, or remain neutral and let their organization's actions and policies speak for them.

A significant but minority group of the nonprofit decision makers felt strongly about aligning themselves and their respective organizations appropriately with social issues of the day. These leaders were adamant that it was their leadership role to be aware of the current issues, and also felt strongly that they should signal (usually by digital means) their particular stance.

Farm director Peter, representing this minority view, was animated when discussing how his organization processed the racial tensions tied to Black Lives Matter:

> We have got to be cautious; we've got to be responsible. We've got to set up, we have a big responsibility to set an example. So (our organization's) statement was,

> we're going to bang this out until we're all really clear, yet we feel, and we feel good about what we're doing and like the right thing, the Black Lives Matter thing was more of, a white liberal (organization) standing back aghast…feeling embarrassed, feeling ashamed, feeling, outraged, feeling guilty, feeling, you know, all of those things and saying, we have to say something.

Peter's organization came up with a set of statements and broadcasted their message on both web and social media channels. Peter was not alone in his sentiment, as other younger respondents had similar things to say including women's shelter director Lisa who further noted:

> I would say the racial injustice things that have happened this year, we definitely did...every organization possible sent that statement out to all their constituents in their e-newsletter that said Black Lives Matter, all lives matter. There was definitely a stigma…it doesn't matter if you were Target, Dell Computers, or a food bank down the street… everyone did that.

This need to lead out, to be quick to be aware, to evaluate, and to communicate on trending and future social issues was also echoed by outreach director Eden, who noted that nonprofits must take a public stance:

> You know, I think now it's no longer an option to just not address things.
>
> But I think if you can read the writing on the wall culturally…because if you're just reacting, you're already, you're playing from behind, you know, you're starting the second half 30 points behind and you can't play your normal play. Cause it's like football. You can't run the ball when you're behind. They know you're not going to do a running play. And so… it makes the game a lot harder.

> And so…I think that's why we're used to in churches and nonprofits…it was more of a corporate thing…Chick-Fil-A believes this McDonald's believe this, it's fine. We (churches and nonprofits) can't do that anymore. And if you do, you get called out now. Like we talked about, silence is saying something, even if you don't want to say something…you can't in our culture. There's morphing into such a stance culture. And so…if you don't address it, it's going to be tough for you.

While the minority of the group was opinionated and vocal, the majority group of decision makers felt neutrality or action over words was better for social issues communication and perception. For this set of leaders, the decision-making process was generally tied to a concern that a stance on a social issue driven issue could potentially alienate clients, donors, and partners.

Farm nonprofit CEO Bo highlighted the need to be cautious on social issues to avoid the potential for divisiveness:

> You look at the social media and all the stuff that I have access to, you will never see me comment on any kind of major social movements. That's the buzz of our community, because (it will) be just like (the) survey (a survey the organization completed about an event). 50% of my people are going to be happy and 50% of them are going to be very, very upset…right? So, it's better for me, as a wise man once told me, just to stay low and do what God called you to do and do it the best that you can possibly do it. But the more I look at the life of Christ, he did a whole lot less yelling and then more doing, I want to find people that are hungry...and not this social hullabaloo.

Food and shelter board chairman Jarvis was also concerned that the organization stay neutral, and while he had personal concerns or opinions, was unwilling to allow a certain agenda to divide his board:

> We have people on the board who want to be very, very explicit on certain things, even, in every meeting…I'm thinking about somebody right now…and they want this cultural war, you know? Our mission here is to provide tangible resources specifically in the food and clothing areas to those in need…so what does that have to do with us posting something (on social media) about Trump or about Biden…nothing.

Instead of social media posting, this set of decision makers often discussed action over words or social media activity. Women and children's board member Weston noted:

> I would say probably because of the scope of what we do, we haven't really faced any pressure to make a stand one way or the other. Because, you know… because of our clientele, and we don't really discriminate, we don't care…you know…what background you come from…kind of like, just come in and we'll help you.

Food and clothing board member Shawn followed Weston with a similar neutral stance:

> I think our purpose is never to be political. It's just to feed hungry people period. And so, I don't anticipate us ever choosing a controversial side. I think our job, no matter what is to stay above the fray of that and the noise and… and feed hungry people period, without letting politics interfere as much as possible.

Weston and Shawn's words were echoed directly by food and clothing long-term board member Paul, who carefully chose his words, and then succinctly summed up what was also being said by others in this staying neutral on social issues theme:

> I do not believe that we should publicly take a side. However, I believe that if anybody watches what we try to do, they know that we are taking a side…we're not trying to prove to the public that we are a virtuous community or virtuous ministry, no virtue signaling. I don't think there's a temptation on the part of our board to virtue signal in a public way, what we think about racial justice or what we think about the poor…I know that everybody on our board believes that the work we ought to be doing would indicate our desire to carry a spirit of service to people.

Inputs

As the nonprofit decision makers of this study discussed their perspectives on the issues management process, they were interested in more than perceptions and optics. They were also interested in getting multiple inputs from various internal and external entities about salient issues. Two prominent input subthemes arose from this issues inputs category: one, coalitions, professional groups, and for-profit partners; and two, staff and clients.

Coalitions, Professional Groups, For-Profit Partners. The majority of board members and CEO/directors talked about nonprofit advocacy groups and nonprofit coalitions as valuable partner stakeholders in the process of issues awareness and inputs. Words such as "helpful," "collaborative," "umbrella," "protection," were commonly used to describe the relationship with these external groups.

Joyce, a women's shelter CEO, noted several layers of national and regional groups that were helpful to her organization:

> So the National Network to End Domestic Violence sends out policy statements that come either to us as individuals, or come through the coalition, and they sort of are reaffirmed at that place. And then sometimes they'll make policies that we know…we have to follow it because that's where we get our funding.

Jarvis, a board president, noted the value of legal-related partners and nonprofit-related coalitions to have helpful inputs:

> One of the best ways…to be in touch with what's happening…(is) through legal measures. We're heavily connected with well, one; we have a lawyer and two; there are other networks, you know organizations like the Civic Justice Institute and the Pacific Justice Institute. I mean we have now a court justice on speed dial, if you will.

Bonita, a director of a large food-related program noted how she turned to her food partners and nonprofit alliances for potential shifts in public food policy.

> So we get a lot of our information from our food partners. In Orange County, there's the Orange County Hunger Alliance, which is made up of the Orange County Food Bank, Waste Not/Orange County, and Second Harvest, which are the three biggest providers of food for the County of Orange. They do a weekly partner's call where they have lobbyists, and they hear about what's going on in Washington.

In addition to cooperating and gaining issues inputs from nonprofit-specific groups, several decision makers, such as farm CEO Bo, noted the value of for-profit partners to gain issues input:

> So those relationships (with food buyers such as Robert Orr Sysco and Fresh Point) also dictate, you know, we could actually follow what their guidelines are for sending them produce and know what the government's doing, because they deal with such a large number of farmers. So, we're not going to believe them the first month, but there's always, you know, you've got 12 months to 24 months to meet a criteria, right? So, we'll hear about the criteria (through our partners). And are we going to attempt to meet that (criteria)?... we've got X number of months. …we've got a heads up and adequate time to prepare.

Staff and Clients. In additional to external inputs, a significant group of respondents discussed how nonprofit staff and nonprofit clients provided inputs into important issues. Food and clothing nonprofit board member Janet highlighted the importance of the staff in bringing issues forward to the board and executive committee:

> I'll add that we have a very talented and capable staff, and it is rarely…I mean… I've never questioned that. I don't think we've ever as an executive committee question (ed), they use our perspective and our ideas, and certainly we are their executive committee, but…you know… they (the staff) never come to us without having already done a lot of research and thought and bringing us all the information we need to together, make that decision.

Women and children's CEO Doug noted he looked to his staff for inputs on issues and operations, suggesting that empowering his staff was essential:

> That's how we work through…we have a leadership team on the staff that that's having those conversations and pushing back at each other…trying not to emotionally make decisions. And so, they've known for five years there, right? Voice matters. They have a seat at the table.

Another women and children's CEO, Bettye, also noted the value of her staff, those being first in line, to help localize issues inputs:

> You know, I do sometimes ask my staff first because I've always felt like the people who are at hands-on or the first in line, they're almost your first responders…I first start with my staff because they know our clients so well, they even know our community.

In addition to staff input, there were several decision makers that demonstrated creative ways to listen to clients to help the organization in the issues management input and decision-making process. Women's shelter CEO Joyce noted that issues awareness came through multiple sources of input, but suggested that a key avenue was "listening to our survivors." This was echoed by another women's shelter director Lisa who noted "the clients are the best ones…that tell us what the trends are."

Other organizations went further than listening by asking clients to join the board. One such example was noted by Jeff, a food and clothing nonprofit board member:

> We need to have a diverse board, not only in age and race and sex and all that stuff, but, you know, economic diversity and…you know…we've got a board member now that used to be a customer, a client of (our organization). How cool is that? Thank goodness we're blessed, but you know, people that have a different perspective, and we need that perspective in that boardroom.

CEO as Issues Leader

In their continuing discussion about the issues management process, the respondents were clear that the issue management process began at the top with the CEO/director. The CEO's often self-reflected this role, and the board members repeatedly discussed their expectation for the CEOs/directors to lead in issues management areas.

Farm director Peter personified the CEO mentality:

> I think that (our members and clients) look to me largely to have my eyes on the horizon, anticipating what's coming and to initiate and have the first thoughts about a response…to facilitate a conversation about the response.

The responsibility to be "in the know" about issues can be heard in the words of Martha, a long-term food and clothing CEO:

> For the most part, I would say it's something that I see…that I'm involved in with work…or I read. The board…if they hear something, of course they will definitely let me know about it…but by and large, those kinds of issues, they're not paying as much attention to anymore. Most of my board is retired and they're not watching those things.

This self-reflexive issue management leadership concept was further discussed by women and children's organization CEO Zena:

> Yeah, it's definitely been me initiating that, not the board, partially because we've got some great board members, but they don't necessarily have their finger on the pulse of some of this…In the past, maybe we've had people who are more

politically engaged, right now (that's) just where we're at… I don't have people who are as engaged politically.

Not only did the CEO's suggest it was their role to lead in issues management, but the board members of this study, by a strong majority, agreed. Paul, a long-term food and clothing board member noted:

> The way that happens in large measure is very, very informative meetings by our director. And his instinct of what he's seen that's presently going on, whether it has to do with money, whether it has to do with perceived needs of those who are coming for help, whether it has to do with the fact that our director knows the (area and issues) very well, that's kind of his backyard anyway.

This sentiment was echoed by not only long-term board members, but also by less experienced board members, such as women and children's board member Charles:

> If an issue of public perception has come up at a board meeting, it's always come from the director…she's really the one that has the pulse on the public perception. Occasionally, especially if it's a fundraising item, the board takes the lead on having the conversation, but I just imagine if there were anything, any policy changes, any public perception issues, those would come from the director and…she would inevitably lead the conversation about it.

Trust

Another common theme in the discussion with these nonprofit decision makers about the issues management process was mutual trust. This was directly stated by many of the CEOs and directors, but discussed in a more inferred fashion by the board members.

Long-term housing nonprofit CEO Richard described this concept from a CEO's perspective concisely:

> I think the most important thing that the president CEO, executive director, whatever head of a nonprofit has to have as a good trusting relationship with the board, especially the executive committee…my opinion it's always been to be as upfront as possible. You're not the board's boss, obviously they're your boss. But at the same time, they rely on you for all of their information.

Women and children's nonprofit CEO Bettye suggested the CEO-board trust went both ways, as she expected her board members to weigh in:

> I will make a recommendation, but it always, always goes to the board. I want them to be aware…I want their support…I'll just be honest; I don't make a ton of executive decisions. I mean, I'm…gathering information. I mean, because number one, I've put people around me that know more than I do about a lot of things that we're doing. I mean, I've gathered those people. Why wouldn't I use their input?

This theme of mutual trust in issues management was suggested indirectly by board members, often when they were discussing the board executive committee or the CEO directly. Words like "transparency," "discussion," and "honesty" emerged.

Food and clothing board member Shawn noted his appreciation for the transparency and openness displayed by their organization's CEO:

> I think she does a great job being transparent. The last thing she's going to do is do something and make us go, well, we didn't know anything about that. Now she may make the decision, but she's going to make sure that the entire board knows about it…what's going to happen with a bigger long-term project.

The board members, even board presidents, felt it was their job to stay out of the weeds of day-to-day operation, but these board members were also glad to step in to find mutual direction on complex issues. Food and clothing board president Patricia demonstrated a “hands off” board perspective:

> I can't speak for other board presidents before me, but I am very much of the opinion that the board is not supposed to get in the weeds of the business of the nonprofit. That's what we pay an executive director for. That's what we pay staff for. That is their responsibility…when there are issues or when there are problems and that's, you know, call on the board, that's what we're here for, to help take care of things.

As part of building trust, several board members talked about the role of the executive committee of the board, how that committee worked with the CEO, and how that committee helped shape the direction of the respective organizations. One such conversation came from long-term food and clothing board member Paul:

> For several years, I've served on the executive committee which is a committee made up of the officers. I believe that executive committee when I was on it… both then, and now…both does really good job before they ever meet with the full board of working to anticipate what we what's really best to talk about both immediately and put down the road. There's an awareness and a real passion on the part of everybody for (our organization) to continue, but to continue in ways that are not necessarily bound in every aspect to the way we used to do it, there has to be an opinion of everybody.

Warning Signs

The final core theme of this study is connected to what food and clothing CEO Martha suggested were "warning signs" to nonprofit decision makers as they worked through issues that had significant future potential danger of public perception or future organizational operation.

Outreach director Eden recalled an issue that required delicate perception management with the organization's donors and the surrounding city at large. Eden's faith-based organization wanted to position itself as inclusive and welcoming, but also wanted to avoid outwardly supporting an annual LGBTQ+ pride parade due to the organizations' strongly held religious beliefs.

> It was one of the first years that the pride parade became a really big thing. So before we found out it was going to be a big deal that year there was going to be, you know, a big parade, pretty close to our main campus. And before then we had not necessarily made a public statement on our views on homosexuality…we saw that coming…so we brought in a partner organization (from our city), and it's a really cool organization. And he (the partner organization director) wants to help equip churches, nonprofits, how to walk well with homosexual people. So yeah, we brought him in, and he was so helpful. He trained our staff (in a) multi-day training. And then we talked about it (in a public meeting). So kind of no-holds-barred, hey, here's what we think. This is what we believe. This is why we believe… one of those, like we said, just family conversations.

Juan, an experienced camp and farm CEO trying to manage an extensive organizational infrastructure rebuild within a complex West Coast local, state, and regional

shifting building code system, discussed how he and the board worked through the pressing and future public building permit policy issues:

> The County really has full authority. However, they have to send anything to Coastal for a 10-day review. But it isn't like you have to go through…you don't have to get a Coastal development permit…even if you get a Coastal development permit, you're dealing more with the County because as long as it's within…it's basically like… it's like the constitution. You know, we cut a deal…here's what we agreed to. And as long as it falls within the guidelines, without interpretation, we don't (have to employ extra permits). And then he says…Coastal trusts us. That's part of the thing. As long as…there's interpretation, but that doesn't fall far from what the plan is laid out.

CEO Juan suggested that doing things carefully, working within the shifting sands of West Coast public policy was important to future operation. Juan recalled the board meeting where these issues came to a head with a board member:

> He's always, as I say, the smartest guy in the room, and he always has been, so I've learned to also listen to the smartest guy in the room, even though I disagreed with him….he (the board member) says, "I'm concerned, we're, we're driving off a cliff" you know? And so, based on that, plus just knowing where, you know, not just him saying that, but just, I realized…where are my two main confidants (on this issue)? I said, listen, together, we agreed to say, you know what? We are going to have to do a deeper dive into some of the things that we're doing.

A different public policy issue was noted by women's shelter CEO Joyce. Joyce was faced with a horizon shift in state retirement funding policy, a retirement system that

many of her staff were vested in due to the nonprofit's state-related community service contracts. According to Joyce, the state retirement system was in danger of losing solvency, and the state legislature was looking for cash flow. The legislature began asking nonprofit contractors to steadily increase their percentage of vestment into the pension system. Nonprofits such as Joyce's couldn't afford to pay horizon-increasing benefits without cutting staff or programming. As the state legislature wrestled with this problem, CEO Joyce described the issue in detail:

> It was, you know, our retirement system is in disarray. So that would be an example of, you know, when, as an executive director being at the coalition level, I'm starting to hear retirement rates going to go up to, you know, when I started in 2006, this is just a perfect example. The retirement contribution rate for employers was seven something percent, (raised to) 49%...projected to go up to 88%. So that's not sustainable for a grant-funded organization, right? So, they're not going to raise our ceiling of grant award, but they're going to squeeze…keep raising that floor…I'm thinking, there's no way we're gonna be able to sustain that.

With this issue threatening to blossom, CEO Joyce and her board sought a proactive and creative solution:

> I went to the board and said, there's no way we're going to be able to sustain this. So, then the finance committee and the executive committee began to brainstorm and (our organization), actually, we created a separate nonprofit organization to serve as a staffing company for us. So, through attrition or layoffs or firings or whatever, we were going to start hiring people through this other entity to be able

to take the load off of our retirement liability. So, you know, that was a strategic decision that we made. It was a win for our organization.

These narratives were echoed by a significant portion of the decision makers around this theme of warning signs. Words such as “future,” “training,” “leverage,” “financial,” and “traction” were noted as the decision makers wrestled with issues warning signs.

Board president Patricia summarized the overall sentiment concisely:

I often say, and this is part of my background…I'm in the optics business, right? You know… I would love to…contract myself out to a bunch of people that need help in the optics business…that's part of my background. And when I worked in corporate, I actually have…certification and training in crisis management. And so, you know, one of the things that you're taught in crisis management is to look for this smoldering crisis, right? And to look for the things that are going to become the big things and to head them off at the pass before they become the big, big things.

Research Questions

The final section of this chapter will consider how the themes and multivocal decision maker responses helped answer the research questions of this study. Each question will be considered with brief reflection on the findings. A more in-depth review of the results and implications will be considered in chapter five.

RQ1 – From the nonprofit decision makers’ perspective, how are issues identified, evaluated, integrated and communicated?

The findings demonstrated that the nonprofit decision makers of this study identified issues through a diverse set of inputs: internal and external stakeholders provided primary issues identification, and many respondents discussed social media and interpersonal connections as indirect means. The evaluation of issues among these respondents was based on mission and values filters, many tied to faith or religion. Trust between the CEO/director and the board was repeatedly discussed as a precursory pathway for issues conversations and evaluation. The integration and communication of issues varied from programming and policy adjustments to more direct outputs via interpersonal conversation, social media, and word-of-mouth.

The findings suggested that the screening of these issues inputs and outputs was through the CEO/director, who was demonstrated as a type of nonprofit issues gatekeeper. The CEO/directors self-reflected this role, and the board members repeatedly demonstrated the importance of the CEO/directors' connection to multiple sources that could help make the organization aware of arising issues.

RQ2 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, what roadblocks exist in the strategic issues management process?

From the decision makers' perspective, the findings suggested that certain types of issues were identified and evaluated more quickly than others. The data indicated that certain social issues, often driven by social media, received more prompt evaluation and action by the decision makers, and these social issues were often pushed along by the CEO/director. Policy issues were more complex in input and awareness, demonstrated more detailed CEO/director-board evaluation, and were thus slower to integrate. While social and policy issues moved at relatively different speeds through the issues

management systems of the represented organizations, the findings suggested that a lack of board issue awareness could present a roadblock or slow evaluation and integration regardless of the issue type.

RQ3 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, how are nonprofit stakeholders (internal and external) involved in the strategic issues management process?

The findings demonstrated a heavy reliance on external coalitions and partners for broad issues input and awareness, as well as an important reliance on internal staff and clients for on-the-ground input and localization. The internal and external stakeholders were more often discussed on the input side of the equation than on the evaluation and integration sides of issues management. While there was an expressed concern for stakeholder optics and perception, the data did not demonstrate a consistent pattern of engaging stakeholders in how an organization should evaluate or communicate issues.

There were, however, some exceptions among the respondents. The data demonstrated how some decision makers found creative means of engaging clients and staff in the issues evaluation process through elevating them to board or committee roles. Further, the data demonstrated that, in some occasions, external partners were consulted in the issues evaluation stage, in almost a "pre-test" of issues alignment and messaging, before final organizational decisions were made.

RQ4 – From the nonprofit decision makers' perspective, does strategic issues management help prevent or mitigate crises?

The discussion and emergent themes around this topic was particularly thick, both from the CEO/director and board perspectives, as the nonprofit decision makers of this

study demonstrated high value of strategic issues management. The data suggested that the decision makers were concerned about warning signs, and communicated narratives that demonstrated how horizon awareness and preventative issues action helped them avoid operational or perception crises.

The narratives tied to crisis avoidance repeatedly demonstrated complex internal issues evaluation, and variant stakeholder engagement, before a decision on issue integration was achieved. On a different but connected finding, several CEOs/directors suggested that signaling about issues too quickly, or shortcutting the evaluation process via social media channels before board input, could cause a perception crisis in itself.

The prevention or mitigation of crises was therefore, according to the findings, tied to timely issue awareness, multi-stakeholder issue evaluation and warning assessment, strategic integration, and careful strategic communication.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter summarizes the findings from the previous chapters and will consider how these findings relate to previous research in public relations and nonprofit public relations. The first section will consider the similarities and dissimilarities of nonprofit issues management processes as compared to traditional issues processes in the literature. The nonprofit decision makers' perspectives on issues management as a type of crisis prevention will also be considered. This chapter will also discuss the findings related to social issues, and how these findings fit within contemporary social media discussions. The chapter will conclude with theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations and opportunities for future research, as well as a brief conclusion.

Discussion

Nonprofit-Specific Issues Management

Public relations literature suggests that issues management has been approached from a systems, rhetorical, and engagement perspective (Coombs et al., 2019; Heath, 2018a; Jones & Chase, 1979). The nonprofit decision maker respondents of this dissertation demonstrated a pragmatic systems approach to on-the-ground nonprofit issues management, a process that follows an emergent input and output issues process with similarities to Jones and Chase's (1979) seminal five-step process of issues monitoring/scanning, issues identification, issues analysis, issue change strategy options,

and issue action program; yet in a nonprofit-specific approach that was simplified and contextualized.

The nonprofit decision makers of this study repeatedly demonstrated a simplified approach to pragmatic issues management. The findings suggested that the nonprofit decisions makers of this study combined Jones and Chase's first two steps (monitoring and identification) into one combined issues input step. The nonprofits further combined the last three steps of Jones and Chase's model (issue analysis, change, and action) as one "as needed" output step. The nonprofit decision makers demonstrated these two steps in a systems-driven issues management approach.

While this simplified input and output issues systems approach was noted in the findings of this nonprofit dataset, and these findings can be compared to a conceptual issues management model, it should be further noted that a similar study of lived experience issues management in small business or small government contexts could produce similar on-the-ground findings. The data demonstrated a simplified process as compared against the conceptual model only.

The findings of this study suggested that the issues input step of nonprofit issues was related to relationships and mutual trust. This concept of trust follows traditional public relations theories that demonstrate this concept as essential to quality stakeholder relationship in various but related theoretical concepts such as symmetrical two-way communication, trust and commitment, and propinquity (Grunig & Grunig, 2008; Heath, 2013; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Further, the nonprofit decision makers repeatedly used the word and concept "trust" to describe how issues were evaluated within their organizations. This trust was

repeatedly evident in the issues management relationship between the CEO and the board. Building on this concept of trust, a small portion of the respondents also empowered and listened to key stakeholders through trust relationships and listening in the issues evaluation step, a direct tie to the relationship propinquity concepts suggested by Taylor and Kent (2014).

This concept of trust also follows the nonprofit literature on the process of nonprofit organizational decision making, where coming to 'yes or no' can be a complex process. As the nonprofit-specific literature demonstrates, trust is predicated by a mutual understanding between mutual parties based on organizational mission and culture filters, and the additional driving factor of philanthropic goals over financial goals (Carroll, 2016; Remington, 2017). The respondents of this study repeatedly talked about organization mission and values as key filters in the evaluation and decision-making processes of nonprofit issues management. While there were other minor outlying concepts demonstrated in the findings, trusting relationships between the salient stakeholders was the primary and prominent conduit for issues identification and evaluation in this context.

The issues output step of the nonprofit issues management process was found to have a broad variance among the respondents of this study. The findings suggested highly contextualized and specialized approaches to issues integration and communication. Nonprofit decision makers employed creative output communication including digital and social media, word of mouth, and interpersonal forms of issues communication. A visual representation of this process can be noted in Appendix E.

While the findings of this study suggested that nonprofit issues management had variance in contextual integration and communication, the findings demonstrated commonality to the literature-defined vantagepoints of issues management which suggest issues management is not a stand-alone process, but is rather a highly integrated, continuous, even holistic, process in an overall organizational public relations strategy (Heath, 2018a; Jaques, 2014; Lauzen,1994, 1997; Straub & Jonkman, 2017; White, 2009). The nonprofit decision makers of this study were repeatedly concerned about organizational "optics" and "perception" tied not just to issues, but to how the organization was publicly viewed as a whole. This strategic awareness of perception, suggests the findings, found the nonprofit decision makers always concerned about how stakeholders such as clients, donors, and other partners viewed the organization, and how appropriate issues management integrated with their respective overall nonprofit mission and public persona.

The Nonprofit Executive as the Issues Gatekeeper

As the organizations approached issues management, the findings of this dissertation suggest that the nonprofit executive, both from self-reflexive and board perspectives, was the primary gatekeeper of salient issues. The executives in the study reflected both an attitude of responsibility, as well as an attitude of necessity, to lead their respective organizations in the issues management process, and to serve as the primary filter/gatekeeper for the broad stream of issues awareness data available to them. In addition to traditional news and modern social media feeds, the executives demonstrated a broad range of available issues awareness data ranging from national organizations, regional coalitions, nonprofit and for-profit partners, and clients. The nonprofit issues

awareness and early filtering, the responsibility of cutting the issues input data down to size, rested primarily on the shoulders of the executive.

The data of this study not only pointed to the gatekeeper role CEOs and directors were playing in issues awareness and filtering, but also as a key part of the nonprofit issues management process. From a systems and process standpoint, these gatekeepers literally decided what issues-related information came to the board or staff for evaluation, and what issues related information was rejected or deemed non-important. These gatekeepers either opened the process for full issues evaluation, or closed or denied issues data from further consideration. In short, these gatekeepers were not only filters, but they also controlled the issues on/off switch from the top or beginning of the nonprofit issues management process.

The data of this dissertation not only suggested that the issues gatekeeper has connection with filtering and processes, but in this context, the data and gatekeeper process further suggested a nonprofit leadership style that could have similarities with a corporate-style, or business-like leader. While nonprofit leadership styles were not directly explored in the literature review of this study, a recent nonprofit study suggested that a certain leadership type may be preferred by nonprofits: servant leadership. While strong leaders and servant leadership may be compatible, the consideration of issues gatekeeping in tandem with preferred or demonstrated leadership style could provide interesting future study (Allen et.al, 2018).

The concept of a gatekeeper is not new in communications and public relations, it has traditionally been conceptualized in an information or news context (Janowitz, 1975),

and this concept continues to be conceptualized in more modern contexts tied to the ideas of, for instance, a social media influencer (Navarro et al., 2020).

It should be further noted that traditional issues management models are set within a corporate context, and as such, assume that issues scanning, awareness, and even initial issues analysis is a corporate process handled by a specified group of employees and reported up the chain based on certain criteria for then appropriate consideration (Brown, 1979; Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath, 2018a; Jones & Chase, 1979). This was not the case among the local and regional nonprofits in this study, there is simply not the budget and staff to do so. Instead, the executives of this study relied on ad-hoc teams of diverse stakeholders to assist them in issues awareness, then opened the gate for issues analysis to the board when they deemed such action appropriate and salient.

At least among the respondents of this study, the executives were seen as serving this issues gatekeeper role, as well as other essential functions in nonprofit organizational management. There are practical limits to the capacity of the single filter/gatekeeper. While the executives of this study valued and practiced issues management, several executives pined for more paid staff, volunteers, or external services that would help them filter the appropriate inputs, and therefore help them better manage appropriate issues.

Nonprofit Client Stakeholder Empowerment

The nonprofit decision makers of this study engaged their clients in issues management. This client engagement was repeatedly demonstrated in the awareness of issues or input side of the nonprofit issues management process, but also, as an outlier, on the output side. Decision makers found creative ways to either directly observe or directly

ask clients what issues were important in day-to-day interaction, and some decision makers even asked clients to serve directly on the board of directors, an interesting demonstration of shared management. This decision maker and client interaction allowed not only for hyper-current issues inputs, but also allowed for client contextualized issues outputs and communication.

The concepts of client empowerment and shared management demonstrated in the issues management process of this study are similar to concepts found in modern nonprofit literature. Discussions in the literature suggest that traditional nonprofit decision structures have been top-heavy and business-like with the executive and board holding power, with the clients viewed as down the chain (Andrasik & Mead, 2019; Kissane, 2010); therefore, often removed from decision making. However, modern literature suggests that client empowerment is possible through a progressive mindset and combined stakeholder interest (from executive, board, and client) (Freund, 2017; Routhieaux, 2015). In this study of the nonprofit issues management process, the client engagement and empowerment were valued and practiced form a small but significant portion of the respondents.

Social Issues, Wicked Problems

The findings of this study demonstrate an interesting nonprofit issues management process, and this process was particularly evident within the context of social issues. Social issues gain traction on web or social media platforms, and, according to the literature, people are looking more to organizations rather than the government to be contemporary social change agents (Coombs et al., 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath, 2018b). Coombs and Holladay (2018) suggested that social issues can actually be

"wicked problems" for organizations, as these issues are often divisive in nature and enflamed on social media platforms.

The decision makers of this study were divided down observed experiential lines on how nonprofit organizations should manage social issues. Generally, the nonprofit decision makers with relatively significant nonprofit experience suggested that their respective organizations should avoid engagement with social issues that were not tied to their respective missions, stay in their lane, be strategically neutral, and avoid broad organizational communication tied to these social issues.

While these mature leaders shared narratives of social issues input awareness and discussion of social issues, the mature leaders were much more cautious to engage in social media or public signaling tied to these issues. The term "signaling" was repeatedly used by these mature leaders, but in a way that suggested signaling was not the best route for social issues communication outputs, rather organizational practice was superior. In many ways the experienced decision makers of this study demonstrated the same process of issues evaluation in the social issues context as they did for other issues, demonstrating multi-stakeholder input, careful mission and values evaluation, and cautious issues action and communication.

However, the findings of this study demonstrated that the less experienced nonprofit decision makers had divergent approaches to issues management in the context of social issues. Not only did these young leaders feel a need to lead their organizations to "take a stance" on trending social issues via social media and the web, but these decision makers also tended to shortcut a full evaluation process, and to be more reactive than proactive to social issues.

Issues Management as Crisis Avoidance

The respondents of this study also demonstrated a trend to employ the issues management process to avoid future crises. The relatively experienced decision makers in this study shared repeated narratives that demonstrated the value of employing horizon issues inputs and evaluations into appropriate organization issues actions that helped their organizations avoid reputational and operational crises. These alignments not only helped the nonprofits avoid a future crisis, but also opened unique doors for future growth and organizational resilience.

The findings of this study suggest that the nonprofit decision makers employed the same contextualized issue management process as previously discussed, but when these decision makers shared narratives of organizational crisis avoidance, they also discussed heavy stakeholder input in the awareness and evaluation of the horizon issue. One nonprofit decision maker suggested that issues management and crisis avoidance involved "avoiding a knee-jerk reaction" and instead strategically pulling in multiple stakeholder inputs, and even pre-testing output messaging. The nonprofit decision makers of this study were concerned about both future optics and future operations, and repeatedly demonstrated the value of issues management as crisis avoidance. In many ways these decision makers were pragmatically engaging not only in issues management for public relations purposes, but also issues management as a vehicle for strategic planning.

These findings align with a vein of nonprofit issues management literature that suggests that issues management is a pathway and process to avoid potential crises. These scholars further see crisis management as an integrated public relations process.(Heath,

2018a; Jaques, 2014; Lauzen, 1994; White, 2009). Strategic issues management, as an integrated part of strategic public relations, noted these scholars, is also a salient way to prevent horizon crises.

Theoretical Implications for Public Relations

The findings of this study add to the conceptual and theoretical arenas of public relations in three salient pathways. First, this study extends issues management process concepts into a little-explored context of nonprofit organizations. Second, this study highlights the value of issues management as a proactive crisis avoidance concept. And third, this study suggests that social media's rapid-fire nature adds pressure on organizations to potentially react to issues vs. manage issues.

Issues Management in Nonprofit Contexts

This study extends traditional and contemporary issues management concepts into a new context: the nonprofit organization. Issues management has traditionally been explored in a corporate context (Brown, 1979; Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath, 2018a, 2018b; Lauzen, 1997), but this study suggests that issues management processes and salient outcomes are viable in nonprofit contexts.

Nonprofit organizations are divergent from traditional corporate contexts, in that they tend to be operated in a leaner fashion, have divergent stakeholders, and rely more heavily on relationships with stakeholders for direct monetary donations and volunteer hours for organizational sustainability (Campbell, 2008; Remington, 2017; Worth, 2020). Issues of all types have the potential to put pressure on these important relationships. This study extends and synthesizes issues management concepts as well as public relations

stakeholder relationship concepts in an exploratory fashion (Grunig & Grunig, 2008; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Taylor & Kent, 2014). By highlighting the relationship concepts of trust and propinquity from traditional public relations theories, this dissertation demonstrates further conceptual extension and application, and provides of pathway for future consideration of these concepts.

This study also follows a growing cadre of scholars that have extended public relations concepts into this nonprofit context, and answers a call by these leading researchers for additional conceptual and contextual studies (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019). By extending issues management concepts into this context, this study cracks the door open for future researchers wishing to further explore issues management in this context.

Issue Management and Crisis Avoidance

The findings of this study also follow and support the vein of research that views issues management as a conceptual and practical vehicle for crisis avoidance. These scholars suggest that the practice of proactive issues management, as part of an integrated public relations program, can help an organization see horizon issues and strategically manage them before they become a crisis (Heath, 2018a; Jaques, 2014; Lauzen, 1997; White, 2009). This study's findings provide preliminary data that suggest proactive issues management can indeed help an organization both avoid future crises and align with future opportunities. This research therefore provides a pathway for future scholars to more fully consider issues management and crisis avoidance connections and correlations.

As this study considered the systems and internal processes tied to nonprofit issues management, this research also answers the calls of leading public relations scholars such as Taylor (2010), who suggested that crisis management research "must move beyond its preference for studying organizational tactics and strategies after a crisis has occurred and instead focus on internal organization processes to better understand how and why crisis is allowed to foment in an organization" (p. 698). The minutia of the nonprofit issues management and decision-making processes of this study, and the on-the-ground perspectives of the decision makers, provide this inside "foment" knowledge, and as such, this research provides a template for further expansion.

Social Media and Pressure for Issues Signaling: A Short-Circuit?

The findings of this dissertation suggest that the rapid-fire nature of social media puts pressure on some nonprofit organizations to quickly signal or communicate about certain types of issues, thus shortening or reducing the traditional steps of issues management, and causing some of the nonprofit organizations in this study to become more reactive rather than proactive. The findings found that this was particularly true in the context of social issues, what Coombs and Holladay (2018) called "wicked problems."

The potential to shorten the issues management process under certain situations or within certain contexts has potentially intriguing conceptual and theoretical implications, as there are only a small group of studies that have considered social media's direct impact on the issues management process. It should be noted that social media's impact on crisis management models is well noted, and this realization has led to an entire new vein of research and a broadly applied crisis communication model, socially mediated

crisis communication (Austin & Jin, 2017; Graham et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2011). The findings of this dissertation highlight the need for more social media considerations in contemporary issues management conceptual and theoretical constructs.

Practical Implications

This dissertation suggests four practical implications for nonprofit organizations: 1) creative issues scanning allows for informed nonprofit issues awareness and gatekeeping, 2) issues evaluation with multiple stakeholder inputs and core value adherence promotes trust, 3) nonprofit decision makers that dealt with smoldering issues avoided crises and captured opportunities, and 4) nonprofits are not immune from trending social issues, but experienced leaders found ways to remain aware yet neutral on non-mission related social issues.

Creative Issues Scanning and Gatekeeping

Several nonprofit decision makers of this study gathered information by scanning future issues through multiple informational input sources. Primary issues awareness sources included a blend of traditional news and social media, nonprofit coalitions and networks, and regional and national religious infrastructures. Secondary issues awareness included nonprofit clients, legal teams, government partners, politicians, nonprofit competitors, and for-profit partners.

Experienced nonprofit decision makers in this study found issues awareness and filtering as an important part of their strategic leadership function. These leaders envisioned themselves as the strategic issues gatekeepers for their respective organizations. The creative decision makers found ways to let others help them identify

issues and while also building consensus among stakeholders. Several nonprofit decisions makers reported using task forces, a blend of board members, clients, and community partners to promote issues awareness and action. Others watched their competitors or for-profit partners for shifting trends. With such a broad potential stream of information, creativity was the key.

In a synergy of academic literature and best practice, it is suggested that nonprofit organizations prioritize the issues awareness and identification function through job description, creativity, or outsource (or a combination of the three). Someone will need to play the role of nonprofit issues input and awareness gatekeeper, and as organizations grow, this may be too much for an executive to manage. The nonprofit sector could benefit from an issues awareness conglomeration subscription-driven service that is partially customizable to nonprofit scope and size.

Issues Evaluation Via Trust

The decision makers in this study that shared positive outcomes from issues management practices were the decision makers that sought multiple inputs in careful evaluation of identified issues. The decision makers from both the board and the executive decision-making roles repeatedly demonstrated trust built on transparency and open discussion of pertinent issues. The same decision makers that highlighted mutual trust, also reported that issues evaluations were driven by organizational core values and mission. It was also interesting to find, in some situations, the process of issues evaluation often involved the executive director, the board, and also client or partner input before a final decision was made on how to proceed. In short, those decision makers that listened well were able to evaluate issues carefully.

Nonprofit organizations have complex stakeholders and funding streams. Before a nonprofit goes public with a particular issue, it is suggested that nonprofit decision makers take the time to have open and honest two-way discussions with multiple stakeholders, and that they highlight mission and values as part of the issues evaluation process.

Context of Issues and Crisis Avoidance

The literature and the respondents agreed that dealing with smoldering and potential issues had direct value in both crisis avoidance and captured growth opportunities. While crisis management and related crisis communication gains academic and social media attention, crisis avoidance is often the unseen greater good.

The nonprofit decision makers in this study repeatedly shared narratives in which proactive issues management helped them avoid a reputational or operational crisis. Being aware of the issues on a national level, plus understanding the local context of a given issue was an important factor in this crisis avoidance. Issues play differently based on stakeholder demographics and geographics. What was an important public policy issue in California was a non-starter in Kentucky; and what was a racial issue in West Virginia would have no context in Kansas. The context of issues was important.

Another factor was the value of listening and valuing others. Several decision makers shared issues-as-crisis avoidance stories that started with the organization going one direction on a given issue, only to be redirected by the important input of various stakeholders. This redirection literally saved the organization from a crisis. Listening takes time and patience, but this listening was an important factor in crisis avoidance.

Issues management is not just beneficial in crisis avoidance, it can also provide horizon opportunities; a concept not commonly discussed in the literature, but a concept that was important to some of the respondents of this study. Decision makers in various nonprofit contexts shared stories of how working through a difficult and strategic issue in the past allowed their organizations to be better visible and positioned for future growth.

Social Issues: The Value of Neutrality

Social issues, as demonstrated by the literature and by the decision makers in this study are complex, and in some ways, land in a special issues management category of their own. Most social issues come to the center stage not out of social unity but disunity, so built in biases and opinions are ready-made. This area of "wicked problems" as Coombs and Holliday (2018) describe social issues can be particularly dangerous for nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit organizations must be aware of trending social issues, their dangers, and their opportunities. It is suggested that nonprofits evaluate social issues carefully, and avoid items that may be off or counter mission. Instead, the findings of this research suggest nonprofits should demonstrate social media neutrality on most social issues; yet also demonstrate an internal action that addresses appropriately ranked issues by policy and operational action. In short, rather than chasing social media trends, it is suggested that organizations focus on action over social media signaling.

An executive-summary style overview of these practical implications can be noted in Appendix D. This attached summary was written with a nonprofit leadership audience in mind.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

This study has its limitations, but these limitations also pave the way for future theoretical and contextual expansion. Three main limitations are evident. First the data collection for this dissertation was completed using a relatively small convenience sample of national nonprofit organizations that were primarily tied to the researcher's professional network. Second, the interviews were focused on traditional nonprofit decision makers (CEOs, managers, board members) as a specific unit of analysis; therefore, there was no data collection about the issues management perception/reception/participation of other key stakeholders in nonprofit contexts. Finally, while modern social issues provided some interesting findings, the respondents in the interviews self-selected social issues, without considering a broad or representative panel of social issues.

Sample

The sample of this dissertation was collected in good faith and compliance, but is limited in its scope. With more than 1.5 million U.S.-based nonprofits currently chartered (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019; Worth, 2020), only 22 are included here. The nonprofits considered in this sample are mostly regionally based human services and religious nonprofits; multiple other sizes and types of nonprofit organizations exist, and larger nonprofits are purported to be more business-like in structure and management (Maier et al., 2016; Worth, 2020). Therefore, the findings considered here, while salient, may not be representative of all U.S. nonprofit organizations.

With these limitations in mind, however, the data provides a pathway for future studies among a broader random or targeted sample of nonprofit organizations. For

example, future studies could consider how these issues management process findings hold up among the top 100 US nonprofits and their respective decision makers, and could further consider multiple variables such as organization type, decision maker leadership tenure, and a relative scale of previous issues or crisis management experience. The opportunities to consider these findings of issues management process among the nonprofit sector as a whole are robust.

Semi-Structured Instrument and Interview Process Limitations and Opportunities

With no prior studies available in nonprofit issues management, this study sought to discover emergent patterns through the best practices of the qualitative paradigm. While the semi-structured instrument was designed to address all the research questions of this study, and this instrument provided guidelines for rich and interesting data on the respective research questions, certain areas demonstrated greater dialogue than others.

While this could be noted as a limitation, it could also be noted as a strength. In the qualitative paradigm, adaptation to the respondents is championed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Tracy, 2010). The dialogue was allowed to run towards the interest of the respondents, providing not only answers to research questions, but also providing interesting data broadly related to the research area. These outlying areas often provided additional thick descriptions and contextual understanding to this dissertation.

Unit of Analysis

This study considered the perspective of nonprofit decision makers, represented in the sample as executives, managers, and board members. This perspective is salient and expandable in itself, but this unit of analysis provides only one factor in a two-sided formula of issues management and stakeholder trust within nonprofit organizations. For

future studies, and in light of traditional relationship-driven two-way public relations, the perspective of donor and client stakeholders would be the obvious next salient unit of analysis to consider. Using the findings of this study as a springboard, nonprofit donors and clients could be asked how they perceive previous nonprofit issues management situations, donors and clients could be asked whether or not they perceive that nonprofits should engage in social issues, or these donors and clients stakeholders could be tested on sentiment scales per their perceived need to help co-create issues management strategies. With long-standing and valid organizational trust scales also available (Hon and Grunig, 1997), the opportunity to take the findings of this study and test them among a sample of donors and/or clients could provide an interesting balancing of the nonprofit organizational and stakeholder relationship equation within an issues management context.

Social Issues: A New Conceptual Horizon for Issues Management

This study followed a set of modern researchers that have expanded issues management into modern social issue contexts mainly driven by rapidly shifting social and digital media cycles (Coombs et al., 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath, 2018b). The social issues addressed in this study were limited to those that the respondents found pertinent and contemporary, but future studies could ask a larger respondent sample to consider "side taking" over a broader range of pre-validated issues. This area could also be considered from a big-data standpoint, particularly around the concepts tied to nonprofit decision maker signaling practices on social media. By continuing to study this concept of social issues and social media signaling, issues management could be conceptually and contextually expanded.

Age and Experience: Observational vs. Hard Data

As has been discussed previously in this final chapter, there were some interesting observed patterns in nonprofit decision makers' age, experience, and related action or inaction on issues of various types. When this study was conceptualized, age and nonprofit experience demographics were not designed to be captured by the instrument. Casual conversation and interview side notes, however, began to demonstrate age and experience patterns which have been reported here, but are not ironclad. These demographic data were not collected in a systematic fashion across the sample. However, the preliminary age/experience patterns suggested here, especially the age/experience patterns related to social issues and social stance, are worthy in themselves of future research.

These combined limitations, thus noted in the paragraphs above, are truly opportunities for future research. This researcher has already begun to expand on two of the emergent patterns uncovered by this data, and surely others will follow.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore nonprofit decision makers' perception of the strategic issues management process, and to consider how nonprofit stakeholders help shape this process. By using previous business-context issues management process models as guideposts, and by employing the best practices of qualitative paradigm methodologies, this study proposed to provide thick description and salient understanding to this unique nonprofit context phenomenon.

The importance of the findings can be broken down into five salient areas of consideration: 1) nonprofit decision makers are employing issues gatekeeping (usually through the executive) as a primary issues filter, 2) mission, values, and trust matter to nonprofits as they evaluate issues 3) nonprofit decision makers (CEOs, managers, boards) are practicing issues management in an emergent process that is more concise than literature-defined issues management processes, 4) nonprofit decision makers value issues management as a way to avoid future crises, and 5) nonprofit decision makers were aware and often concerned about social issues pushed by the rapid cycle of social media.

The primary responsibility of scanning and filtering of horizon issues inputs was, according to the respondents in this study, the nonprofit executive. These leaders repeatedly discussed the weighty leadership role of gatekeeping important issues. Taking in horizon information from issues sources such as traditional and social media, nonprofit coalitions, nonprofit competitors, nonprofit clients, and even for-profit partners, the issues identification and input process into the organization started at the top.

Once issues were filtered at the top, the data suggested the on-the-ground nonprofit issues evaluation process was concise. Unlike the traditional four-to-six step issues management processes demonstrated in the literature, nonprofit decision makers were evaluating issues on a quick-study and as needed basis process, basically as one combined and continuous informational filtering and evaluating step. At times the executives moved quickly and alone on salient issues, but most issues were evaluated through board-executive trust and transparent communication. The resulting action and communication on an issue deemed duly important was noted as a direct strategic second

combined step. This emergent process of contemporary nonprofit issues management was consistently filtering information, and strategically taking action while always keeping the stakeholder perceptions in mind.

The nonprofit decision makers of this study were not just concerned about perception, they repeatedly championed mission, values, and mutual trust as important to their organizations as means to evaluate issues. Staying on mission, doing what the organization set out to do, was demonstrated as way to stay focused and as way to set unimportant issues aside.

Nonprofit decision makers of this dissertation repeatedly demonstrated the strategic value of issues management as a type of crisis avoidance. The ability to look ahead, and to gatekeep and filter an abundance of information inputs, allowed the decision makers to together position their organization to either avoid a future crisis and/or to take advantage of horizon opportunities. This value of issues management as crisis avoidance follows a significant set of conceptual literature highlighting issues management as an early warning or crisis avoidance practice.

Nonprofit decision makers' social issue awareness and action, and a relative need for nonprofits to signal or remain neutral, were divergent mainly down observed experiential lines. The more experienced leaders leaned towards a measured social issues management process that led to more organization neutrality and cautious messaging; whereas less-experienced leaders were reactive, feeling pressure to lead their organization to "take a stance," and to appropriately signal to a broad audience their issues values and actions.

The emergent nonprofit social issues management process has both theoretical and practical implications, as the rapid-fire nature of social issues may find traditional issues management models and theories insufficient. All organizational types (corporate, nonprofit, government) must deal with these rapid cycle social issues; and these organizations need better warning systems to see these social issues on the horizon.

Historical Context Statement

The social context and news cycle timeframe of the data collection of this dissertation are intriguing. The data of this dissertation were collected in November, December, and January of 2020-21. Not only was a highly contested U.S. presidential election underway in this timeframe, but the backdrop of the previous year was also filled with news of racial unrest, protests, and the growing threat of the global coronavirus pandemic. In this often polarized and unsettled cultural context, it is important to consider why economic, political, and social unrest may have been on the minds of the nonprofit decision makers of this study. As Coombs and Holladay (2018) suggested, this was indeed an era of "wicked problems," where nonprofit leaders felt pressure to carefully consider a broad array of issues, and to cautiously protect their respective organizational reputations. This historical context does not add nor subtract to the validity of this study, but in future years, a quick glance back at the cultural events of the day might shine an intriguing light on the findings herein.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Intros, IRB language, confidentiality explanations

1) In the preview letter I provided a definition and a few examples of issues that might matter to nonprofit organizations. There may be others you have thought of since we first talked. How do strategic issues come to you or your organization's attention/awareness? Probe: Is there a formal "environmental scanning" process to identify issues your organization uses?

2) Once you identify important issues, how are issues evaluated? Is there a procedure or process in your organization, or is it more ad-hoc? What kind of research is used? Probe: Is it common in the culture of your organization for an executive to deal with issues, or is this a board matter, or is there another unstated but "expected" process? Probe: How do you weigh consequences of taking or not taking an action?

3) So, you said X issue comes to your attention and gets discussed and evaluated, how do you make decisions about integration into operations or policy?

4) Once an issue is prioritized and integrated, how is this communicated from inside your organization to external stakeholders and the general public? What's the process?

5) In your experience, what keeps an issue from going through an evaluation process? What slows it down or stops it? Probe: Is this a "red tape" or "other alligators" problem?

6) Ok so we've talked about how issues process through your organization, what about your stakeholders?
    - What's your experience, how do you gauge what your internal stakeholders think about these issues (such as staff and the full board)?
    - What about external stakeholders like volunteers and donors?
    - Probe: What is your experience of "listening" to stakeholders on issues…formal/informal? Would you describe a conversation with a stakeholder on an important issue?

7) Can you walk me through an issue that came to your attention in the past, what was the "working" process in your organization? What's the story of what this process was really like to live through? Probe: Do certain issues get a higher profile or shorter process? Why or Why Not?

8) Businesses seem to be increasingly asked to "take a side" on social issues. Do you think this is also true in nonprofits? Why or why not? Probe: Is there a time to "stay neutral?" Probe: Should certain types of nonprofits stay neutral?

9) Have you found that managing issues or taking a side has helped you avoid a significant crisis? Probe: What if this had moved in another direction? What would the impacts have been to your organization or stakeholders?

10) Let's discuss three strategic issues on your radar. Why are they important to you as a nonprofit decision maker? Policy, social, other cultural…

Close with thanks for time and reminding of purposes of the study.
Offer copy of the final conglomerated results.

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-20-06126-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 12/03/2020

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Issues Management Process in Nonprofit Contexts

Researcher(s): Andrew B. Brown, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Candace White, University of Tennessee, Knoxville



Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to participate in this research study because you are a strategic decision maker in a nonprofit organization (CEO, President, Director, Regional Manager, Board Chair, etc).

What is this research study about?

The purpose of this study is to explore nonprofit managers' perception of the strategic issues management process, and to consider how nonprofit stakeholders help shape this process.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for approximately one (1) hour during a one-time Zoom interview.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to

- Review the attached explanation of this study, including a definition of issues management, and three short examples of nonprofit issues. This review should take less than 30 minutes.
- Participate in one (1) Zoom interview and give your professional opinion on the issues management process. The Zoom interview should take approximately one (1) hour.
- The Zoom interviews will be audio and/or video recorded for research analysis.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Your participation is voluntary. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, you may contact the primary investigator and request that your interview data be removed, and associated data destroyed.

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-20-06126-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 12/03/2020
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 12/02/2021

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone might speculate about your participation, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we will use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form. Risks are minimal if any.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to directly benefit from participating in this study, and there are no direct incentives. However, this interview may indirectly help you and your organization think through the issues management processes and issues prioritization. We hope the conglomerated data will be helpful to the nonprofit industry broadly.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by storing all data in a double-password protected drive with UT Knoxville.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep the conglomerated data to use for baseline research for future studies. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

Video and audio recordings will be permanently deleted from electronic storage at the completion of study analysis, no later than December 30, 2022.

We will not share your personal data or contact information with other researchers.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers

Andrew B. Brown

Abrown36@tennessee.edu

731.881.7546

Dr. Candace White

white@utk.edu

865-974-5112

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



December 03, 2020

Andrew B Brown,

UTM - Dept. of Communications

Re: UTK IRB-20-06126-XP

Study Title: Understanding the Issues Management Process in Nonprofit Contexts

Dear Andrew B Brown:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), categories 6 and 7. The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1.2) as submitted, and the following study documents:

- Verbal Consent Form v. 2.0
- Consent Cover Letter v. 2.0
- Steps in recruitment and interview process v. 1.0
- Phone and Email recruit Talking Points 10.21 v. 1.0
- Brown Instrument FC10.21 v. 1.0

Approval of this study will be valid from December 03, 2020 to 12/02/2021.

The requirement to secure a signed consent form is waived under 45 CFR 46.117(c)(1). Willingness of the subject to participate will constitute adequate documentation of consent.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB.
Please note that restrictions are in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and all in-person contact with research participants is on hold until further notice.

- Newly-approved studies with in-person interactions may not begin enrollment until further notice from the IRB/HRPP.

- Newly-approved studies with no in-person participant interaction may begin after receiving IRB approval.

Please monitor the COVID-19 Updates at https://www.utk.edu/coronavirus/faq/ for the latest information. Human Subjects Research updates are being filed under Information for Instructors/Research.

Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, **re-approval** of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,



Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.

Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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APPENDIX D: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary for Nonprofit Organization Audience

Small and medium nonprofit organizations make up the majority of the 1.5 million U.S. based nonprofits, yet these small community and regional organizations often work from limited budget and staff resources. However, these nonprofit organizations are finding ways to leverage resources to manage social, public policy, and resilience related issues. Issues management can be as simple as handling unresolved problems between two parties, or as complex as managing strategic-level questions concerning organizational alignment with public policy or societal trends.

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes nonprofit decision makers (CEOs, directors, board members) are using to manage issues, and to further consider how these nonprofits value issues management as a tool for future crisis mitigation and prevention.

Over a period of three months, 22 decision makers from a national sample of human services and religious nonprofits were interviewed about their issues management perspectives and practices. Approximately 30 hours of interview recordings and 250 pages of transcripts were analyzed from a conceptual and academic viewpoint.

These conceptual findings have been reframed as practical nonprofit issues management suggestions in a desire to assist nonprofit decision makers as they work to complete their missions in an ever-shifting cultural and political climate. Four broad areas, practical organizational suggestions, and an observed issues evaluation process chart are demonstrated. These basic recommendations can be remembered with the acronym ATOM (Awareness, Trust, Optics, Mission)

AWARENESS: The Value of Two-Way Stakeholder Conversation

1) *The nonprofits of this study looked to external coalitions, for-profit partners, clients, and line staff for issues identification and awareness. Mutually beneficial relationships were deemed important in being aware of local, regional, and national horizon issues.*
2) *Some nonprofits of this study also pre-tested issues messages with stakeholder groups prior to public communication.*

What your nonprofit can do: Find creative ways to listen to external partners, vendors, clients, and staff. Ask them to participate in board-level tasks forces or ad-hoc committees for both issues awareness and action; make these groups your volunteer issues awareness team.

TRUST: The Value of Transparency Between the Board and the CEO

1) *The nonprofit decision makers of this study valued board-CEO trust, and demonstrated this trust by the way of transparency and listening. This trust provided the foundation for full issue evaluation.*
2) *The respondents of this study noted that boards members don't like to be surprised, and that CEOs don't like to be micromanaged.*

What your nonprofit can do: Build mutual trust by simple things such as a pre-published board meeting agenda (sometimes called a consent agenda). CEOs should avoid the temptation to independently and preemptively react to high-level perception issues, and instead take the time to engage the board. Keep the board-CEO relationship focused on the strategic level.

OPTICS: The Value of Positive Public Perception

1) *A majority of the nonprofits in this study were engaged in some level of issues management, and valued the practice as part of a total optics consideration.*
2) *Proactive issues management helped nonprofits mitigate future crises.*

What your nonprofit can do: Be alert to warning signs or simmering issues that could become a crisis; be proactive. In our social media driven culture, always weigh optics (of your own organization and partner organizations) before shifting policy, joining in advocacy, or taking a controversial side.

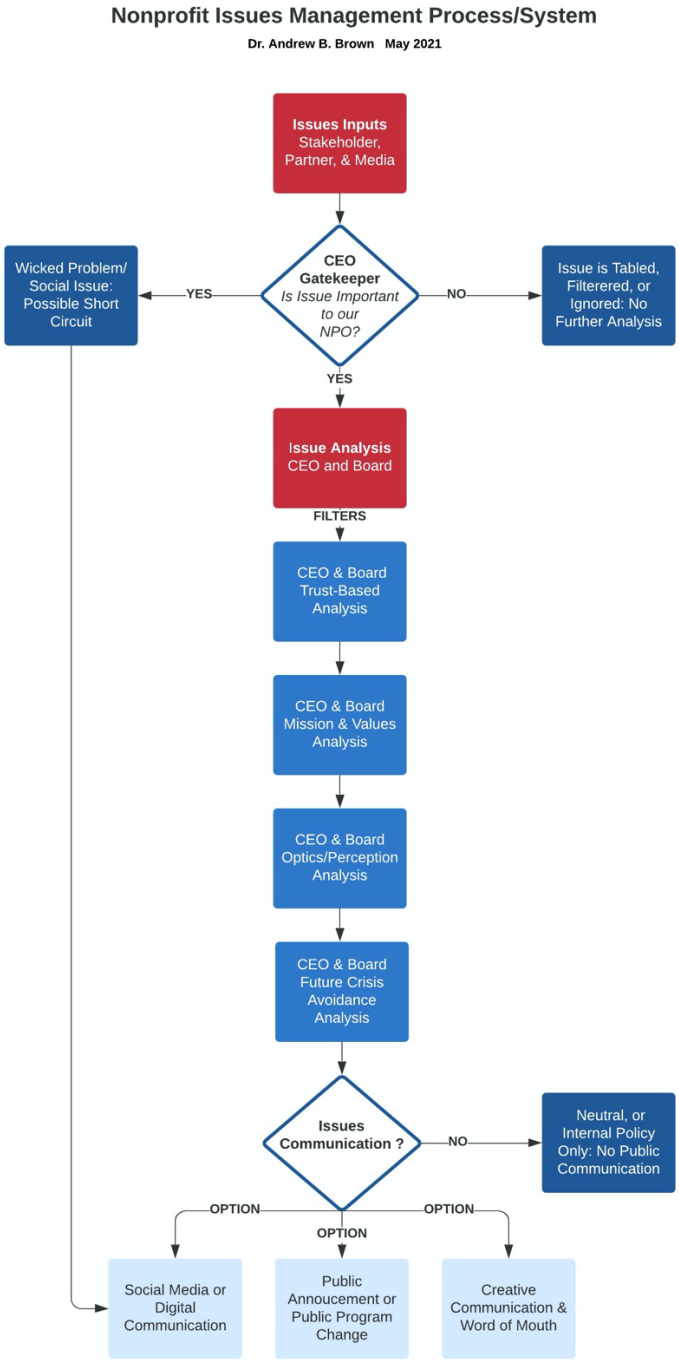
MISSION: The Value of Staying in Your Lane to Avoid Division & Distraction

1) *Several of the nonprofits of this study championed staying on mission and staying in your lane rather than chasing social or political trends often found on modern social media.*

2) *The organization's CEO, as well as the organization's mission and values, were considered primary filters for whether or not an issue should be considered.*

What your nonprofit can do: Be aware of social issues, yet set boundaries for public engagement. If the issue could impact your organization, engage carefully after complete issue analysis. If the trending issue is nonrelated to your organization, consider neutrality as an option.

APPENDIX E: NONPROFIT ISSUES MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS FLOWCHART



VITA

Originally from Texas, Andrew "Drew" Brown grew up in the Copper Basin area of Polk County, Tennessee. He graduated from Copper Basin High School, and then attended the University of Tennessee at Martin and received a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications.

After an early career in nonprofit public relations, Drew went on to gain two master's degrees: a M.A. in Religion and Education from Mid-America Seminary, and a M.A. in Journalism and Public Relations from the University of Memphis. Mid-career provided opportunities for executive leadership with two Nashville-based nonprofit organizations, before he returned to UT Martin as an Instructor in Public Relations.

Drew then chose to attend the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Communications and Information with a concentration in Public Relations. His research interests include issues, risk, and crisis communication; nonprofit public relations and nonprofit management; entrepreneurship and community development; Appalachian history and sociology; and creative pedagogy in modern learning contexts.

After graduation, Drew will formalize his position as an Assistant Professor of Public Relations at UT Martin, and will continue to consult with national and international nonprofit organizations.

Drew wishes to thank his wife of 25 years, Amy, for her undying support, and his two daughters, Brennan and Eden for their encouragement in this dissertation journey.