



The institutional context of crisis. A study of the police response during the 22 July terror attacks in Norway

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we address the institutional context of the police response during the 22 July terror attacks in Norway. Our analysis shows how institutionalized informal practices, established over time, influenced the police response during the attacks. The response presented challenges in terms of management of *actor complexity* (the number of actors involved and the need for coordination) and *uncertainty*. The importance of these dimensions is discussed based on the police's response during the terror attack in Oslo in 2011. Our analysis of the course of events shows that the resources dedicated to strategic management were marginalized during the event and that insufficient attention was directed towards intelligence and investigation. This contributed to an ineffective police effort to track and capture the perpetrator and prevent or respond to the secondary attack. This is similar to what is often found in hindsight investigations of crises. The aim of this paper is to contextualize and analyze these findings in light of the institutional context of the Norwegian police. Reports from exercises before and after the terror attack indicate that the marginalization of strategic work, intelligence and investigation has been and remains a persistent problem in the Norwegian police. Interviews indicate that there are informal aspects of the police organization regarding status and established conventions of what “proper police work” is about that explain how the observed inadequacies are deeply embedded in the organization. As such, the paper is not a study of a failure in crisis management, but rather the institutional patterns of action that make actions and decisions stand out as meaningful for the actors involved in dealing with situations of high complexity and uncertainty.

1. Introduction

On 22 July 2011 a lone right-wing terrorist parked a van with a 900 kg fertilizer bomb outside the Government Quarter (GQ) in Oslo, Norway. The bomb killed eight persons and left nine seriously injured. The terrorist proceeded to the island of Utøya, where the youth wing of the Norwegian Labour Party held their annual summer camp. Armed with a pistol and a semi-automatic rifle, he shot and killed 69 of the camp participants. Although similar events have occurred in other parts of the world, this was an unexpected and largely unpredictable event for the organizations responsible for the safety and security of Norwegian citizens.

We analyze the coordination of the police response to the attack and the challenges related to the decentralization and recentralization of

decision-making authority in such a complex and highly unexpected event. Coordination is defined as the process of managing interdependencies between activities (Malone and Crowston, 1994). The case represents a rare opportunity to study coordination and decision making in fast-response organizations (Faraj and Xiao, 2006; Curnin et al., 2015; Schakel et al., 2016).

Our study expands the existing knowledge of coordination and decision making in fast-response organizations by addressing not only the switching between situational practices in singular situations, but also the way combinations of several unexpected events create additional challenges related to coordination and the distribution of decision-making authority within and across organizational borders. We also add to the literature on coordination and decision making by showing how the distribution of decision-making authority in crises is rooted in an

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institutional context and history. Our analysis indicates that institutionalized informal practices, embedded in the police organization, may partly explain the emergent command structure and decisions taken, as well as the ability to coordinate and utilize information during an overwhelming and quickly evolving crisis. Employing the analytical concept of institutions presents a risk of misunderstanding as in common language it may refer to establishments in public and civil sectors, for instance education, marriage, family, or even different types of formal organizations, such as the police, schools, courts, companies, etc. As an analytical concept in sociological theory, however, institutions refer to integrated and historically constituted practices (Selznick, 1957) and a system for sensemaking maintained over time (Douglas, 1986; Scott, 1995).

The structure of our argument is as follows. First, we show how unfolding events in the July attacks revealed weaknesses in the ability to combine on-site management of a critical situation with a more distanced, analytical overview and strategic analysis during rapidly evolving incidents. Second, based on our analysis of exercise reports, we argue that these were known issues identified in previous events and exercises. Third, we discuss how these persistent problems can be seen as a consequence of organizational and institutional traits in the police, also influencing the measures chosen to improve the police in the aftermath of the 22 July terror attacks.

In hindsight, decisions and actions might appear as individual mistakes or human errors. However, as illustrated by Weick's (1993) analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster, the sensemaking processes undertaken in such situations are situated in a temporal stream of events and actions. Lagadec (1993: 54) makes a similar point when he states that "The ability to deal with a crisis situation is largely dependent on the structures that have been developed before chaos arrives." But where do these structures come from? Training is one source of scripts that influence the action patterns chosen in situations of high stress and pressure. However, training and psychology are not the sole explanations of how groups of people act and interact when forced to take important decisions rapidly in an ongoing situation. Our analysis provides a contextual explanation showing that interactional patterns, the distribution of status and authority and the organizations' collective experience must also be taken into account. We show how mistakes and mishaps in such a critical situation can be quite understandable and partly explained by deeply rooted institutional traits in the police organization.

Our study thus complements the more social psychological explanations of the police response offered in previous analyses of the Utøya disaster (Johannessen, 2013) and the analysis by Christensen et al. (2015), which is more oriented towards administration and management levels. Our findings underline the need for broader organizational analyses of emergency management organizations, particularly those faced with high uncertainty and with a high demand for coordination. We show that decisions and emergent collaborative patterns that arise during an overwhelming crisis are influenced by existing informal values and practices in the organization. For example, by studying the institutional context also beyond crisis situations, one may achieve a better understanding of the decisions and choices made when the organization is overwhelmed by scenarios that require improvisation and swift reconfiguration.

2. The 22 July terror attacks and the Norwegian police

2.1. The attacks and their significance

The terror attacks on 22 July were a shock both for the general public and the political establishment. Norway is regarded as a peaceful corner of the world with few internal conflicts and good relations with its neighbours. The attack itself and particularly the cruelty towards young victims at Utøya stunned the citizens of Norway. The public eye had been directed towards the threat of jihadist terror and the fact that

the perpetrator was a white Norwegian was also a shock. The events were followed by inquiries and investigations into how these events could happen and what Norway as a society could and should learn from them.

The definitive investigation report, among several, was the Gjørv commission's report (Gjørv, 2012). This identified several weaknesses in the emergency response, particularly within the police force. It also pointed more generally to weaknesses in the Norwegian public sector. One of the most striking was the inability of relevant authorities to act on a well-recognized need to install a physical road barrier to prevent the threat of car bombs being placed in front of government buildings. A car bomb scenario, similar to the actual attack in the GQ, had even been modelled a few years before the bombing. Inter-agency co-ordination problems, as well as discussions with the municipality and general public, delayed the implementation of barriers. The target and nature of the secondary attack was much more surprising and the criticism in the Gjørv report regarding this was more focused on the ineffective response than the lack of prevention.

2.2. The emergency response organization of the Norwegian police

The emergency response organization of the Norwegian police includes round-the-clock activities to handle regular police tasks and extraordinary events. The response organization is formally divided into three levels: tactical, operational and strategic.

The *tactical* level consists of police officers, led by an Incident Control Officer who manages the activities at the site of the event. The Incident Control Officer is mobilized if the event is considered too complicated for a single police patrol to handle, or if there is a need for coordination with other emergency response resources (such as the fire department or health services). The Incident Control Officer can appoint and delegate responsibilities to deputies, such as Task Force Commanders, when necessary.

The *operational* level is the information and coordination hub in an operation, receiving alarms and calls, determining the tasks to be performed and coordinating resources. Situated in the Operations Center at the police station, the Operations Control Officer is supposed to monitor and evaluate the ongoing situation, secluded and shielded from the intensity of police work at the site. The Operations Control Officer has authority in decision making over the Incident Control Officer and is supposed to function as the head of *strategic* decisions as long as no staff body has been established. Simply put, the Operations Control Officer is supposed to order tasks to be done, whereas the Incident Control Officer should decide *how* to conduct them. If the complexity of the event exceeds certain criteria, a staff body should be established on a *strategic* level. This comprises a team of expert advisors within specified fields, such as police operations officers (P3) and intelligence officers (P2). The levels of the emergency organization are thus Incident Control Officer (tactical), Operations Control Officer (operational) and Staff (strategic), with P2 and P3 as the key roles in the staff organization.

The reader should note that though the term "operational" in other contexts typically refers to the "sharp end," this is somewhat different in police terminology in which it denotes activities undertaken in the Operations Center to coordinate actions on the site(s).

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Uncertainty and swift coordination

The decision-making processes and attempts to make sense of unfolding events have clear parallels in Weick's (1993) discussion of the Mann Gulch fire. Decisions and analyses are entwined and seemingly incomprehensible mistakes and omissions become more understandable when traced as elements in an evolving sensemaking process. Our analysis of the coordination challenges encountered is informed by the literature on coordination in organizations generally and in fast-

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