

Organizing to manage risk: the operations of a police tactical unit

Ph.D Dissertation

Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
University of Missouri St. Louis

Jeff Rojek

Abstract

This dissertation examines how operational personnel within organizations manage risk in uncertain environments. Of particular interest are operational personnel who work in potentially dangerous or lethal environments. Two organizational models are presented as possible frameworks for understanding the efforts of these individuals. The first is the rational model, which emphasizes the formal process of analysis, decision making, and planning that has dominated the risk management literature. The second organizational model is based on Weick's (1969, 1979, 1995) collective sensemaking framework, which asserts that the identification and response to hazards is best understood as an informal interpretation, communication, and coordination process. This study then provides an empirically grounded evaluation of each model's ability to explain risk management efforts among operational personnel, thereby advancing the organizational risk management literature that has primarily been proscriptive in nature. The basis for this empirical evaluation is a case study of a police tactical unit. I collected the data on the unit over an eight-month period, and includes observations, interviews of current and former unit members, and the review of official documents related to the unit. While there are formal procedures that provide some guidance for the unit members, they do not resemble the detailed plans called for in the rational model. Rather, the risk management process of identifying and responding to hazards by the unit is more reflective of the informal organizational efforts described in the collective sensemaking model. The policy and research implications for tactical units, police work, and organizations in general are discussed.