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Crisis of Man to Crisis of Men: Ray Rice and the NFL's Transition from Crisis of Image to Crisis of Ethics

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CRISIS OF MAN TO CRISIS OF MEN: RAY RICE AND THE NFL'S TRANSITION
FROM CRISIS OF IMAGE TO CRISIS OF ETHICS

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Communication
Western Kentucky University
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts

By
Heidi E. Sisler

August 2015

CRISIS OF MAN TO CRISIS OF MEN: RAY RICE AND THE NFL'S TRANSITION
FROM CRISIS OF IMAGE TO CRISIS OF ETHICS

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to DEB. You will always be one of my favorites as well.

I have been blessed to know so many wonderful people already in my life, but I have found a sort of bittersweet pattern of meeting some of the most extraordinary people of my life just a short time before I'm due to move on to a new chapter. If ever that pattern was the case, it is here, with you. I cannot put into words the impact you made on my life from the first time I talked to you at the department picnic to the conversations in your office to the conversations at the bakery. My work, my experience, and my life are all the better for knowing you. You pushed me to produce papers I didn't know I was capable of writing. You pushed me to submit my work for publishing when I didn't have the courage to believe in my own abilities. Because I've known you, I look in the mirror and I see myself through your eyes. I see potential. I see capability. The saying is so very true that we all stand on the shoulders of giants, and I want you to know that in my memory you will always be one of the tallest. I am moving on to new beginnings unfettered and proudly accomplished, and I have you to thank for that. Thank you for reaching out in my hour of darkness, and for bringing hope and light with you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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Using typologies by Benoit (1995), Seeger (2006), and Heath (2006) this study argues that when an organization encounters multiple complications (e.g., perceived guilt, magnitude of harm, nature of the victims, etc.) compounding a crisis situation, that the organization's best course of action is to employ atonement rhetoric. Second, this study also argues for the inclusion of a new best practice in crisis communication, which highlights the importance of organizations to recognize the impact visual evidence, especially video footage, has on complicating crisis response while also increasing demand for an appropriate and timely response. To do this the study uses the above typologies as well as Koesten and Rowland (2004) to carry out a rhetorical analysis of the NFL's response to the Ray Rice crisis. This study finds that the NFL's crisis response through the first three phases, though using nearly all of Benoit's (1995) strategies, fails to meet all of Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) best practices. It is only through meeting the requirements for atonement set out by Koesten and Rowland (2004) that the NFL meets the recommended best practices and achieves resolution from this crisis.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ware and Linkugel (1973) first presented apologia, and put a name to the form of rhetorical response that follows after a person (or organization) has been accused of some form of wrongdoing. From this initial introduction, numerous scholars have attempted to add to this body of scholarship by investigating and identifying specific crisis response strategies (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Hearit, 1995; Heath, 2006; Seeger, 2006; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). However, nearly a decade after Ware and Linkugel's original treatise, Kruse (1981) argued that the realm of team sport embodies unique situational factors that affect the apologetic rhetoric of individuals in the sports arena in ways not previously discussed in the apologetic literature. Kruse's seminal article on this communicative intersection has given rise to many new studies focusing on the nuances of this context (See Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2013). However, much of the literature has focused on singular individuals making amends for personal actions, which carried significant personal and professional repercussions for themselves and their teams. The following study was carried out to fill a gap in the literature by applying these theories to new contexts in order to extend their application and the understanding of how they work in various situational contexts. Specifically, this study adds to the understanding of effective crisis response by analyzing a sports governing body's response to a prolonged organizational crisis, which included a multi-strategy approach and contained several distinctive stages of response.

Under the leadership of Commissioner Roger Goodell the National Football League (NFL) has been no stranger to controversy or crisis. The League and Goodell have been scrutinized and often criticized throughout his leadership for the handling of various crises. For example, the Michael Vick dogfighting scandal broke shortly after Goodell was hired in 2007 (as cited in Jerome, 2009; Rhoden, 2007). More recent crises include referee lockouts (Boren, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Pearson, 2012) and controversies surrounding game violence and player concussion rates (Kass, 2014; Keating, 2012; Slothower, 2013). However, under Goodell's nine-year leadership, arguably no crisis has resulted in as many fumbled attempts to salvage the image and reputation of the NFL as the recent scandals involving violence perpetrated by NFL players off the field.

In 2014, league crises involving charges of domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault by its players brought serious speculation about the culture of violence cultivated and perpetuated by the sport, as well as grave accusations regarding the complacency of NFL officials to domestic violence incidents involving NFL players. Among the whirlwind of story lines playing out during this time, the domestic violence case involving former Baltimore Ravens running back, Ray Rice, became the focal eye in the media maelstrom.

The NFL's overall crisis involving players and charges of domestic violence and abuse first started in February 2014 with the arrest of Rice and his then-fiancée, Janay Palmer. On February 15th, Rice and Palmer became involved in an altercation while in an elevator at the Revel Casino Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey ("Key events," 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). Later that same day, Rice and Palmer were both charged

with simple assault, and on February 19th, celebrity news group, TMZ, released “video [footage] of Rice dragging Palmer out of the elevator in which the incident occurred” (“Key events,” 2014, p. 6). In the months to come, charges against Palmer were dropped while Rice’s charge of simple assault was increased to a single felony charge of aggravated assault (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). In the days immediately following the incident, Baltimore Ravens’ officials such as general manager, Ozzie Newsome, and Ravens head coach, John Harbaugh, released statements supporting Rice and assuring the general public that Rice would play during the 2014 season (Downing, 2014a; Hanzus, 2014; Hensley, 2014; Sobleski, 2014). Over the next few months, Ravens officials continued to speak in support of Rice, even after his indictment, which took place the day before his wedding ceremony to Palmer (“Key events,” 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). Ravens owner, Steve Bisciotti, added to these assurances and also commented on the need for compassion for Rice and his family (Mink, 2014). As Ravens executives attempted to respond to the publicity surrounding this crisis, the NFL, as the governing body over this team, remained relatively silent about the entire incident (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014).

It was not until June 16, 2014 that NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell, met privately with Rice and Palmer to discuss the events of February 15th, and it was another month before the NFL made any official comments, as an organization, about the scandal (“Key events,” 2014). After Rice’s attorney successfully got him admitted into a pre-trial diversionary program intended for first-time offenders (which cleared him of the charge after a year) on May 20, 2014, the NFL officially suspended Ray Rice for the first two

games of the 2014 season (“Key events,” 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). According to an *ESPN* article, “Almost immediately [after this suspension], there was widespread criticism of and questions about Goodell’s investigation, evidence and judgment” in this crisis (Van Natta and Van Valkenburg, 2014, para. 64). Many critics of the suspension argued that it was too lenient and seemingly arbitrary, citing instances where players had received longer suspensions for “seemingly less harmful violations, such as smoking marijuana” (Belson, 2014a, para. 4). Critics further argued that such leniency demonstrated a lack of concern about domestic violence and a “cavalier attitude towards violence against women” (Fitzgerald, 2014, para. 4).

For the next month, Goodell contended with criticism for his judgment in the Rice case by speaking publicly at conferences and announcing new domestic violence policies for the organization and its members (“Key events,” 2014). Then, on September 8, 2014, TMZ released a second video, this one clearly showing what took place inside the elevator of the Revel Casino Hotel on the morning of February 15, 2014 (“Key events,” 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). The second video showed footage of Rice throwing a “crushing left hook to Janay’s face,” causing her to hit her head against the elevator railing and falling to the floor unconscious (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014, para. 76). Both the general public and the NFL’s reactions following the release of this second video were quick and decisive. On the same day as the release of the second video, the Baltimore Ravens terminated the remainder of Rice’s five-year, \$35 million contract, and within an hour of the team decision, the NFL also released a statement banning Rice from the league indefinitely (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). In the

days and weeks to follow, media outlets and news articles echoed renewed public concerns about who in the NFL knew about the extent of the violence perpetrated by Rice and for how long, and just how lenient the two-game suspension appeared in light of this second video (Red, 2014; Breech, 2014).

After the NFL announced its decision to indefinitely suspend Rice from the league, the organization provided multiple statements and interviews to answer accusations of complacency and cover-up regarding the handling of the case prior to the second video's release ("Key events," 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). Questions about the NFL's conduct in this crisis were revisited again in late November 2014 when former U.S. District Judge Barbara S. Jones granted Rice's appeal and reinstated him to the league (Belson, 2014b; McCann, 2014; O'Conner, 2014). Jones' ruling favored Rice's argument that he was penalized twice for the same incident, a violation of one of the articles in the collective bargaining agreement, which specifically forbids "double punishment for the same act or conduct" (McCann, 2014, p.). Jones's decision further described Goodell's decision and reasoning about suspending Rice from the league as arbitrary and vague, thus, making the NFL's response appear more suspicious (O'Connor, 2014; Belson, 2014b). After this court censure, the NFL's response and cleanup continued on for several more months, nearly a year after the inciting incident, and the organization released press statements, reports, and policy approvals on into January 2015.

Out of nearly a dozen cases being reported on in the media during this time, no case received the same amount of attention from the media or the NFL as the Rice case.

Further, no other player's case resulted in the same suspensions as Rice's. Thus, this case stands as a particularly noteworthy point of analysis within the realms of sports and crisis communication.

The Rice case is also unique because his personal crisis of image ensnared the entire NFL organization and resulted in a multi-phase crisis response. Therefore this study analyzes the specific crisis response messages released by Roger Goodell and the NFL in the wake of the media trial involving Rice and his wife, Janay Palmer. Specifically, this study argues two main points. First, that when an organizational crisis includes multiple extenuating factors (e.g., perceived guilt, magnitude of harm, nature of the victims, data showing guilt, and violation of traditional moral standards) that compound and complicate the crisis situation, the organization's best course of action is to employ atonement rhetoric in its crisis response. Second, this study also argues for an additional best practice to be added to Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) lists. This new best practice highlights the importance of organizations to recognize the impact visual evidence, especially video footage, has on complicating crisis response while also increasing demand for an appropriate and timely response. To make these arguments, the study investigates and analyzes early crisis responses made by the NFL using Benoit's (1995) strategies of crisis response and then applies Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) list of best practices in crisis communication to see how well the responses meet those recommendations. Additionally, this study looks at how those early responses contributed to the crisis situation and led to the organization's eventual use of Koesten and Rowland's (2004) theory of atonement rhetoric to repair its own reputation in the

aftermath of the scandal. This analysis will be rooted in key organizational crisis literature that will be outlined in Chapter 2.

This study is important to the fields of organizational and crisis communication for three main reasons. First, as a case study, the NFL crisis involving Rice and his felony assault charge offers an interesting look at a unique series of events, which led a large public organization to respond publicly to the personal crisis of one of its members. Blaney, Lippert, and Smith (2013) compiled one of the first collections of essays specifically focusing on image repair within the sports arena; however, of the 21 collected articles, only a handful include a governing body or organization in their scope of analysis, and even then, none of these crises demonstrate an instance where a public sports organization is ensnared in a crisis originally caused by a single individual player within the organization.

In this case, Rice was not just a member of the Baltimore Ravens, but an extremely public personae and extenuation of the team and the NFL. His very public friendship with Baltimore Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, along with his many appearances at local charity events and fundraising and awareness raising endeavors for campaigns helping sick and disadvantaged children created a very strong association among Rice, the Ravens, the NFL, and these community outreach groups (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). Even more prominently, prior to this scandal, “Rice was the longtime spokesman for M&T Bank, one of the team’s main sponsors and one that has its name on the Raven’s stadium” (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014, para. 18).

Due to Rice's very public celebrity and association with the Ravens, and therefore the NFL, his personal crisis became a threat to the corporate social legitimacy of both the Ravens and the NFL. Hearit (1995) explained that "corporations exist in a state of dependency upon their environments" and that an organization's social legitimacy and ability to thrive relies on a "publicly recognized congruence between the values of a corporation and those of a larger social system in which it operates" (p. 2). Therefore, this study's main focus looks at the NFL's response rather than the Ravens' response for two reasons. First, the NFL is the overarching and governing body for all NFL teams, meaning that any crisis involving a member of any team could potentially require league response. Second, the expectation that a governing body is responsible for responding to the crisis of an individual member or team is demonstrated by the amount of media coverage that focused on the NFL's response throughout this crisis.

A second reason for the importance of this study is that, again, as a case study, this crisis offered an excellent point from which to analyze not only the function of the strategies outlined in Benoit's (1995) Theory of Image Restoration in responding to a crisis of this nature, but also the ways in which the use or disregard for the best practices delineated by Seeger (2006) and Heath (2006) play into the effectiveness of an image repair campaign. Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) recommendations are newer and less tested than Benoit's typology, thus the current study's use of these recommendations as points of analysis expands the literature concerning crisis communication. Throughout this crisis, both journalistic reviews and organizational admissions by the NFL demonstrated a complete lack of consistency in applying any of these standard

recommendations, let alone all of them. Thus, this crisis offered the ability to both pinpoint where the organization failed on each recommendation, but also provided an excellent teaching illustration for why these recommendations are important and how an organization can further exacerbate a crisis situation when the crisis response is not planned, consistent, and meeting the needs and demands of the organizational publics. Last, this crisis also offers an example for suggesting the expansion of these best practices to include specific recommendations regarding crises that involve visual evidence of misconduct (especially of a graphic or violent nature) made available to the general public.

The final reason for the importance of this study is its ability to extend the application of atonement rhetoric in the field of crisis communication. Currently, The Rhetoric of Atonement, as a theory, is largely untested, with only a handful of applied case studies (Jerome, 2008; Koesten & Rowland, 2004; Shepard, 2009). This study offers the opportunity to provide an additional example of atonement rhetoric by testing its principles using the crisis response of a sports governing body. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, a series of failed crisis response messages and the release of the second video showing Rice punching Palmer, forced the NFL to make very definitive decisions and statements regarding the organization's involvement in this scandal, each of which closely aligned with the specific actions and statements required for an entity to make amends through atonement rhetoric, as outlined by Koesten and Rowland (2004). Therefore, this case study offered the opportunity to analyze how an organization can

also benefit from using this particular crisis strategy, especially after other responses have been employed but fallen short of their goal.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter will look at the relevant literature in the intersecting areas of organizational communication and crisis response. This literature review will be divided into three primary sections: literature on organizational crisis and image restoration, literature on organizational crisis and apologia, and literature on atonement rhetoric as a specific form of apologia.

Organizational Crisis and Image Restoration

First, it is important to start with an understanding of what constitutes a crisis. This study is situated in Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer's (1998) definition of organizational crisis, "a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals" (as cited in Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 7). The word "crisis" on its own conjures up many negative connotations, but when crisis is observed at the organizational level, those connotations take on larger and more threatening proportions. For example, Seeger et al. (2003) asserted, "organizations seen as causing a crisis may lose legitimacy, credibility, reputation, and ultimately income" (p. 4). Thus, it is important to understand how to effectively and competently respond to crisis situations at the organizational level. However, this goal is easier said than done as Benoit (1995) pointed out, "The need for discourse designed to restore our reputation arises because, as human beings, we inevitably engage in behavior that makes us

vulnerable to attack” (p. 67), and that the source of these behaviors can stem from a myriad of motivations including self-interests, scarce resources, difference in opinion or goals, to simple mistake or unforeseen events (Benoit, 1995). Regardless of source of motivation, in addition to the threat of significant financial loss posed by crisis, organizations risk a potentially greater social loss through organizational reputation. Benoit (1995) theorized that reputation “is a crucial commodity because it contributes to a healthy self-image” as well as playing an important role in influencing and persuading audiences (p. 69). Thus, organizations that are unable to handle crises effectively can risk current profits as well as future profits by damaging their reputations past a point of recovery, which can lead to a plethora of outcomes affecting the organizations internally and externally.

On the other hand, several crisis communication theorists view organizational crisis as a two-sided coin. Seeger et al. (2003) explained, “Crises are sources of profound human loss, tragedy, and agony and are also the precipitating factors for radical, rapid, and often positive social change” (p. 3) In this way, theorists recognized that from tragedy and agony can come good that might otherwise have been postponed or suppressed; thus, in any crisis there is potential for a silver lining. From this point of view, then, it is important to study what crisis is, why it is important, and how it can be handled in order to learn how organizations can find and utilize the silver linings of their crises.

Last, when studying crisis communication, one of the most practical outcomes of such a study is to identify strategies for responding to crisis in both an effective and

competent manner. Benoit (1995) explained that communication, as it relates to crisis, “is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity... [and] maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals” of that activity (p. 63). Therefore, crisis response at the organizational level is not simply a series of reactions to an event, but instead, should be a detailed and planned out strategy created prior to a crisis (Heath, 2006). At best, “Crisis-response strategies should affect how publics view responsibility for a crisis and the organization in crisis... [since] crisis situations affect these same perceptions” (Coombs, 1995, p. 469).

For this reason, several crisis communication scholars have endeavored to compile lists and resources that identify what strategies can be used at what times and to what effect in crisis scenarios (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997; Heath, 2006; Seeger, 2006). Benoit (1995) provided a foundational treatment on types of responses used in crisis by identifying fourteen different responses, which can fall under one of five different categories: denial, evading of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, or mortification. Pertaining to this study, the NFL uses 11 of Benoit’s 14 strategies at least once throughout the crisis timeline. Therefore these strategies bear defining. Under denial, Benoit (1995) distinguished between simple denial, which is a plain statement denying the event occurred wrongdoing took place and shifting the blame, which argues that the individual accused is not the one who committed the wrongdoing. Under evading responsibility, both defeasibility and good intentions are relevant to this case. Defeasibility is a strategy that argues the accused lacked information with which to make a well-informed decision while good intentions

intends to justify the accused's action based on their motives or intentions (Benoit, 1995). In both cases, the strategies attempt to evade responsibility for the crisis. Benoit (1995) listed several strategies for trying to reduce the offensiveness of the wrongdoing. Bolstering attempts to do this by increasing positive feelings for the accused by highlighting their positive actions. Minimization attempts to reduce the magnitude of the bad feelings towards the accused by showing that the crisis is not as bad as it appears while differentiation attempts to reduce bad feelings by distinguishing the crisis from other similar but worse events (Benoit, 1995). Benoit (1995) identified transcendence as another technique for reducing offensiveness by justifying wrongdoing by appealing to higher values. Attack the accuser is the last strategy under this category, and it relies on discrediting an accuser by throwing suspicion or doubt onto the credibility or motives of the accuser (Benoit, 1995). Last, Benoit (1995) also listed a few more accommodative strategies including corrective action, which seeks to make amends by fixing the source of the problem, and mortification, which is the act of expressing a sincere apology of regret and asking forgiveness for the wrongdoing.

Following Benoit's (1995) presentation of these strategies, Coombs (1995), Benoit and Drew (1997), and Coombs and Holladay (2002) took these response strategies and analyzed them under a lens of "appropriateness" to suggest when each should be used and how it might be received. Specifically for Coombs (1995), appropriateness was a question of responsibility and intention – is the organization responsible in any way for the crisis, and did the organization know about and intend to correct any threats before the crisis occurred? Depending on the answers to these questions, a crisis can be

categorized in one of four ways with a flow chart helping responders to determine a suitable response style. On the other side, Benoit and Drew (1997) argued that appropriateness, from the perspective of public audiences, can be more restrictive. Benoit and Drew (1997) found, in general, “strategies that were considered appropriate were also considered effective... [and] the strategies that were rated inappropriate were also rated ineffective” (p. 159). More specifically, audiences rated mortification and corrective action as the most appropriate and effective forms of response while also consistently rating bolstering, denial, minimization, and provocation as the least appropriate and effective (Benoit & Drew, 1997).

Seeger (2006) provided an excellent list of recommended best practices, which resulted from a panel discussion of crisis communication experts, and Heath (2006) added additional insight to these recommendations. These works reinforce previous scholarship on crisis response by providing specific recommendations that can help crisis responders format their responses (and the strategies within those responses) in a way that meets the temporal and structural demands of a crisis (e.g., when to respond, how to respond, and to whom to respond) while also meeting certain human factors present in many crises (e.g., the need for demonstrating care and concern for publics and showing a unity in goals with organizational audiences). Again, these relative “check lists” for crisis responders are newer than the strategies they help to explain, therefore, testing can help to show the link between the function of these strategies and the goals they meet in crisis response.

However, the interplay between previous scholarship and these recommendations can already be seen in some aspects of crisis literature. As Coombs (1995) pointed out how the media can influence crisis perceptions, Seeger (2006) recommended responders endeavor to “meet the needs of the media and remain accessible” (p. 240) and Heath (2006) added to that, “be committed and able to deliver on the promise to be the first and best source of information” (p. 248). Coombs (1995) and Benoit and Drew (1997) both recommended mortification in the form of a sincere apology in many crisis situations because “we are often willing to forgive... when the apology seems sincere” (Benoit & Drew, 1997, p. 159). In the same way, Seeger (2006) made several recommendations along this score, including: “communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy” (p. 241), “listen to the public’s concerns” (p.238), and “honesty, candor, and openness” (p. 239). In addition to these four suggestions, Seeger (2006) recommended planning ahead for events that are both likely and unlikely to happen, creating a periodic review process to ensure plans are up-to-date, using language and strategies that foster and benefit public partnerships, working with community representatives and organizations that can enhance organizational credibility, accepting and acknowledging ambiguity in situations, and including messages of self-efficacy. Heath (2006) added to this the importance of understanding that crisis response functions as a narrative storyline. Thus, this study intends to utilize these findings and recommendations to dissect the NFL’s Ray Rice crisis in order to understand what strategies and recommendations were used or ignored and how they contributed to the escalation of the crisis.

Organizational Crisis and Apologia

Moving beyond definitions of organizational crisis and general forms of image repair, a review of the foundational works linking the fields of organizational crisis, apologia, and sports is also needed. Ware and Linkugel (1973) offered the first treatment of apologia as a genre of public discourse stating their belief “that apologetical discourses constitute a distinct *form* of public discourse” (p. 273), and that this form of public discourse “is usually a public speech of self-defense” (p. 274). However, decades later, Hearit (1995) distinguished the differences between individual apologia, which was the focus of Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) discussion, and corporate apologia, which can more generally be conceptualized as “apologetic efforts” (Hearit, 1995, p. 3), arguing that “An apologia is not an apology (though it *may* contain one); rather, it is a response to a social legitimation crisis in which an organization seeks to justify its behavior by presenting a compelling, counter account of its actions” (Hearit, 1995, p. 3). Coombs and Holladay (2002) explained, “An organization’s reputation, that is, how the organization is perceived by its publics, is a valued resource that is threatened by crisis” (p. 167). Thus, it is logical that an organization that relies on a favorable reputation in order to make profits and garner social influence, would feel compelled to respond to accusations that undermine its social legitimacy and taint its public image.

Hearit (1995) continued to differentiate the two forms of apologia by pointing out how organizations use apologia “when faced with social legitimacy crises that impair their economic viability” as opposed to facing charges that are strictly “against their moral nature”, as is seen with many of the individual accounts referenced in Ware and Linkugel (1973). More interesting still, Kruse (1981) brought into this discussion how

crises within team sports take root in a separate system of social norms and standards, which further differentiate themselves from other forms of organizational crisis. Kruse (1981) explained, “The ethic of team sport holds that the team is greater than any of its individual members” (p. 273), and “Those who perceive themselves to be individuals rather than members of a team risk condemnation, even rejection” (p. 274). Thus, it is critical for team players to refrain from any activities that could negatively impact team performance (Kruse, 1981). Should this happen, then, “sport personalities must defend their moral worth *as sports figures* whenever their conduct might have harmful effects upon teams, games, or the world of sport and their actions seem to result from personal characteristics that make them unworthy to represent the fans” (p. 274). However, Kruse (1981) did include an important caveat to this; Kruse states that since winning is the dominant goal and “ethic” in sports some behaviors which might be found unacceptable outside the sports arena may be overlooked or excused if coming from a winning team or individual.

Due to the unique nature of organizational crisis and corporate apologia, the topics have been a popular source of study; however, with varying and sometimes contradictory, accounts and findings for many researchers (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Hearit, 1995; Rowland & Jerome, 2004). Despite the variation in outcomes, several studies have concluded that determining how to respond to a crisis is more complex than simply picking one of Benoit’s (1995) strategies.

Organizational image repair must take into account factors such as the type of crisis taking place, but also other variants such as an organization’s responsibility in the crisis,

the organization's amount of control in preventing the crisis, and the organization's performance history in having and responding to similar crises (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Rowland & Jerome, 2004). Each of these factors plays into the success of a given crisis response and whether or not the involved publics will accept that response.

However, because of the considerable amount of variation that takes place within this field, Rowland and Jerome (2004) argued, "strategy choice in relation to the primary purpose of organizational apologia – image repair responding to perceived wrongdoing – is heavily influenced by the specifics of the situation facing the organization. Consequently, it is impossible to identify an overarching strategy typology that applies to all subgenres of organizational apologia" (pp. 199-200). Instead, the authors suggested that in studying crisis response, scholars and practitioners should consider four elements that all organizational crisis responses use in order to perform *image maintenance*. Just as Hearit (1995) recommended that organizational apologia included "a dual strategy of a positive and negative rhetoric... [where] corporations seek to distance themselves from their illegitimate behaviors and then create identification with the public values they are reputed to have violated" (p. 6), Rowland and Jerome (2004) stipulate that ideal image maintenance should include messages that (1) demonstrate concern for victims, (2) bolster organizational values, (3) deny intent to do harm, and (4) indicate intent to prevent recurrence by pursuing the "root cause" of the crisis. At the same time, the authors warned that additional *image repair* strategies should be employed when organizations are perceived as guilty, when the magnitude of harm or the nature of the

victim is perceived as particularly detrimental, when there is data that indicates actual responsibility, when a crisis involves the presence or absence of a crucial third party, and last, when actions leading up to a crisis are perceived as violating traditional moral standards within the situated culture (Rowland & Jerome, 2004). Thus, in relation to this study, the analysis can build upon the work of previous scholars to see how the unique environment of the sports arena influenced the crisis situation and response, in addition to looking at which set of practices and recommendations were followed in the NFL's crisis response strategy.

Atonement Rhetoric

The last section of this review considers the rhetoric of atonement, a relatively new and developing subgenre of apologia that aligns with the arguments of Rowland and Jerome (2004). Koesten and Rowland (2004) first theorized about this subgenre when they argued:

The rhetoric of atonement can be classified as a sub-genre of apologia with its own distinct characteristics. Where traditional apologia is used to defend one's character (either an individual's character or the character of an organization), the rhetoric of atonement functions as a purgative-redemptive device for an individual or an entire organization. Through purgation, redemption is produced and the relationship between the person or organization and the wronged party is healed.

(p. 69)

The authors further differentiated rhetoric of atonement from other apologia strategies by explaining:

Atonement rhetoric does not “restore” the image directly, but admits that sinful behavior has occurred in an attempt to gain forgiveness and long-term image restoration. Its goal is both forgiveness for a sinful act and restoration of the relationship once the sin has been expiated. (Koesten & Rowland, 2004, p. 69)

Koesten and Rowland (2004) clearly stipulated that atonement rhetoric is an all or nothing response strategy that cannot be used in conjunction with other strategies that attempt to “deny, displace, or justify past actions” (p. 69). The authors explained that atonement rhetoric, in order to be successful, must display five critical elements. These elements include: (1) acknowledgement of wrongdoing and asking forgiveness, (2) demonstrating a complete and sincere change in attitude and relationship, (3) demonstrating honest change for the future, (4) committing public or private acts of mortification to show authenticity of remorse, and (5) publicly seeking atonement for the wrongdoing (Koesten & Rowland, 2004). In their work, Koesten and Rowland (2004) outlined examples of each of these elements using several speeches by Bill Clinton during his presidency. Using their examples from Clinton’s radiation apology, in October of 1995, Clinton formally apologized for government sanctioned human experiments on radiation exposure that were carried out between 1944 and 1974 (Koesten and Rowland, 2004). To meet the first and fifth requirements of atonement rhetoric, Clinton publicly addressed the nation and formally acknowledged that the US government had knowingly sponsored these experiments without patient consent and had actively kept them secret

(Koesten and Rowland, 2004). To meet the second and third requirements of atonement, Clinton called for a change in the government's attitude toward secrecy and its relationship with American citizens, and he laid out several specific steps to make sure these changes took place (Koesten and Rowland, 2004). Last, Koesten and Rowland (2004) noted that Clinton's words demonstrated pain and regret for the government's past actions, and that in combination with the steps he outlined, this met the fourth step of committing an act (this one was public) of mortification to show true remorse.

Despite its relatively recent introduction into the field, a few scholars have already applied this strategy to varying situations and found various insights. Jerome (2008) applied the concept of rhetoric of atonement to NASCAR driver, Tony Stewart's, image repair campaign after he initiated a physical altercation with a photographer after a disappointing finish in 2002. In her analysis, Jerome (2008) found an interesting deviation in one of the criteria posed by Koesten and Rowland (2004). While Koesten and Rowland (2004) stipulated that the wrongdoer must ask for forgiveness, Jerome (2008) found that Stewart's image repair campaign was successful despite the fact that his "key audiences actually never heard or saw Stewart ask for forgiveness outright" (p. 132), suggesting that the person or organization using rhetoric of atonement simply has to "create the public perception that forgiveness was sought and/or given from the wronged party/parties" (p. 132) in order to meet this first criteria.

The remainder of this study will apply the previous insights and findings to the analysis of the NFL's crisis response during the Rice domestic abuse scandal. Applying these concepts and findings will allow this study to see how the current case can add to

previous literature by supporting, extending, or negating previous literature with the case study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This research focused on analyzing official messages/artifacts created by NFL officials during the Ray Rice crisis. These artifacts included official NFL announcements, press releases, reports, and statements, provided to the public and posted to the “Press Releases” archive under the “NFL Communications” section of the organizational website (<http://nflcommunications.com/category/press-releases/>). Additional artifacts included non-NFL published news articles with statements from NFL officials and transcripts of personal or conference interviews with Roger Goodell. Each of these artifacts was collected electronically over an eight-month period starting in September of 2014 and progressing through April of 2015. The analysis analyzed a total of 27 individual artifacts ranging in date of publication from July 24, 2014 to January 8, 2015.

Limiting the parameters of selection to the aforementioned artifacts was important for two main reasons. First, in keeping with a lens of analysis consistent with an organizational communication scope, it was important to restrict any artifacts or messages that could potentially fracture or confuse the official message and stance of the NFL organization. Thus, any articles, interviews, or statements that focused on responses or reactions from Baltimore Raven’s executives or officials, messages from players, executives, officials from any other team in the NFL, or personal statements from family and friends of any involved parties were incorporated into the study only when they (the artifacts) inform the NFL’s statements and assist in understanding the response campaign’s success/failure. Second, limiting artifacts to only messages put out by Roger

Goodell and other NFL officials also allowed for an additional point of analysis in this study to see what information the organization felt warranted a post to their organizational website versus what messages or information the organization decided not to highlight on their own news resources. This additional point of analysis added insight into the ways the organization responded to each point of crisis throughout the nearly yearlong scandal.

In carrying out this research, after collecting all texts, artifacts were grouped into phases of the NFL's crisis response. Jerome (2008) provided a similar structure for her analysis of Tony Stewart's atonement campaign. In Jerome (2008), as with this study, breaking the crisis response into distinct phases allowed the analysis to uncover how the events in one phase influenced the development of strategies in subsequent phases. Each phase consisted of a significant event within the overall NFL/Ray Rice crisis and the subsequent communications that come out from the NFL in response to that major event. Therefore, moving in chronological order, Phase One starts with the altercation between Rice and Palmer on February 15, 2014, and includes all responses (or nonresponse) through June 2014. Phase Two begins in July 2014 with the NFL's first official acknowledgement of the Rice crisis, in which the organization issues a two-game suspension and fine for Rice's misconduct. Following this action, the rest of the NFL's communications in this phase respond to questions about this suspension. Phase Three begins in September 2014 with TMZ's release of the in-elevator video footage, and includes communications intended to respond immediately (within the first 10 days) to this new event. Phase Four is more a continuation of the end of Phase Three's

demonstration of atonement rhetoric, but focuses on demonstrating commitment to promises made, more than demonstrating change, as seen in Phase Three. This structure functions to demonstrate how the failures in each previous phase lead the NFL organization to an inevitable end, which required atonement rhetoric in order to finally make amends for the initial and subsequent failures.

In carrying out the actual analysis, this study first looked at which crisis response strategies, as outlined in Benoit (1995), were used to respond to each significant events in the crisis. This first point of analysis also included some small components of content analysis, in which the number of strategies and their individual frequencies of use were recorded in order to see which of these strategies was more heavily relied upon in each communication and phase. Second, the analysis looked at how the major events in the crisis met (or did not meet) the standards set forth in the best practices of crisis response, as discussed in Seeger (2006) and Heath (2006). All artifacts were analyzed using a rhetorical analysis, or close textual reading that is informed and focused based on the lens provided in selected academic works. In this textual reading, Benoit's (1995) crisis response strategies along with their definitions and goals, were the selected lens for analysis. Therefore, all artifacts were reviewed in chronological order, and statements or arguments made within each communication, were reviewed for strategic intent based upon the definitions outlined in Benoit (1995). For example, during an interview in Phase Three, Goodell makes a statement that denied any knowledge about seeing the in-elevator video before its release by TMZ. This statement only intends to deny that wrongdoing

(e.g., seeing and withholding the video) took place, thus, based on Benoit's definition, this statement was recorded as a statement of simple denial.

After all artifacts were reviewed and statements were assigned a specific crisis response strategy, then communications were analyzed using Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) "check lists" of best practices. Under this review, each phase's communications were analyzed together, and based upon the media reports of the public reactions to these responses, the subject and content of each response within a given phase, and the responses in proceeding phases, each phase was evaluated for how well the organizational responses met or did not meet the recommended best practices. This second point of analysis is found at the end of each phase section, after Benoit's (1995) strategies are first identified, in order to show how these strategies can work to meet or fail to meet the best practices.

These first two analyses lead to the last stage of analysis in this close textual reading. This last stage is informed by a second theory, Koesten and Rowland's (2004) theory, Rhetoric of Atonement. As argued in Chapter 4, Phases Three and Four in the NFL's crisis response require the use of atonement rhetoric to achieve resolution in this crisis because communications in Phases One, Two, and part of Three failed to meet the demands of the crisis through implementation of Benoit's (1995) strategies. Thus, this last stage reviews the communications in Phases Three and Four, and based upon the intentions presented in each statement, statements and artifacts are assigned to one of the five requirements needed in atonement rhetoric, as presented by Koesten and Rowland (2004). This last stage of analysis showed how the NFL's inability to respond correctly at

the beginning of the crisis led to a situation in which its only crisis response option was that of atonement. Additionally, in reviewing the atonement statements while looking at Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) best practices, this last stage of analysis showed how using atonement language can help organizations meet the best practices of crisis communication at the same time as rebuilding their image.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As stated in Chapter 3, this analysis of the NFL's public responses to the Ray Rice crisis is divided into four distinct phases marked by significant turning points in the crisis timeline. The first phase in the NFL's crisis response takes place between February and June in 2014. Overall, this phase is characterized as a relatively silent period in the NFL's crisis response. The second phase takes place between July and August in 2014, and displays an organizational focus on the actions and responsibility of Rice. Phase Three contains organizational responses from September 2014, and marks a significant turning point in both the rhetoric and crisis response strategy for the NFL. At the end of Phase Three the NFL begins to take ownership for its own failings in this crisis. In the last phase, which takes place between November 2014 and January 2015, the NFL organization continues to demonstrate commitment to the promised changes in Phase Three, thus, also continuing to publicly meet several of the requirements for atonement.

Phase One: Relative Silence

Phase One is the longest period of time in this timeline, spanning five months, from February 2014 to June 2014. This phase provides some of the most symbolic interactions while also remaining the most rhetorically empty period in the crisis. As an organization, the NFL remained virtually silent about the physical assault perpetrated by Rice against his then-fiancée, Palmer. The NFL neither acknowledged nor provided comments about this case during this period. At this point the NFL's silence indicated that the organization did not feel this was a crisis that warranted an organizational response; but that it was a Ravens' crisis, which the team had to handle. In doing this, the

NFL attempted to dissociate the overall organization from the crisis created by a single member of one team. This strategy of dissociation is highlighted in Hearit (1995); however, Hearit argues that this strategy must be more active and should consist of active organizational messages that attempt to dissociate an organization from crisis through redefining the situation, and not simply remaining silent about this situation.

As such, at this point in the crisis, the Ravens took the lead on responding to this crisis. On Monday, February 17th, just two days after the incident, during a public press conference, Ravens general manager, Ozzie Newsome, assured interested audiences that, “Ray Rice was still a big part of what we plan to do in 2014” (Sobleski, 2014, para. 5). Newsome also stated that his assurance came after a meeting with Ravens head coach, John Harbaugh (Sobleski, 2014). These assurances, coming on the heels of an article titled “No Doubt Ravens Hitching Wagon to Ray Rice,” published on the Ravens’ official website on Saturday, February 15th, not only acknowledged the incident taking place between Rice and Palmer, but they also demonstrated a clear rhetoric of support for Rice.

Later the same week, Harbaugh also addressed the Rice incident while at the NFL Scouting Combine. The head coach reiterated Newsome’s rhetoric, but he also made sure to stipulate that this was “based on the information that the Ravens have received” (Downing, 2014a). Additionally, Harbaugh explained, “The facts will determine the consequences, always” and that he had not seen anything that would suggest the Ravens drop Rice (Hanzus, 2014). These statements were made just days after TMZ Sports released the first video footage outside the hotel elevator on February 19, 2014, which showed Rice dragging an unconscious Palmer out of the elevator (“Key events”, 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). After this footage was released, Ravens officials

continued to support Rice, but also displayed more ambivalence and reservation in those statements of support. Days later, on February 22nd, General Manager Newsome responded to press questions about Rice and the TMZ video footage stating, “John said it best yesterday: ‘We will let the facts determine what the consequences will be’” (Corbett, 2014, p. 4). Newsome elaborated on this, saying, “The whole video needs to be reviewed... I don’t know whether a different story is going to come out. The video is what it is” (Corbett, 2014).

Based upon these statements, within the first week of this crisis, it is clear the Ravens made attempts to respond quickly to public inquiry about the Ray Rice incident and also that the team officials coordinated their responses in order to keep information consistent. These efforts positively demonstrated three of Seeger’s (2006) and Heath’s (2006) best practices. First, responding quickly about the incident and answering additional questions at each press conference helped to “meet the needs of the media and remain accessible” for more information (Seeger, 2006, p. 240). At the same time, acknowledging in their statements that outcomes of the crisis depend on facts that are yet to be determined also positively met the principles of demonstrating an acceptance of uncertainty in crisis and that “crisis response is a narrative”, which requires accuracy and coherence to be told well (Heath, 2006, p. 247). Further, by responding quickly and consistently throughout this phase, the Ravens not only met Heath’s (2006) best practice regarding crisis response as a narrative, which requires the recognition that a crisis has a specific beginning (e.g., the time of the inciting incident) and that a response campaign must follow shortly after that beginning on through the middle to the end, but the Ravens also met Heath’s (2006) best practice about committing to being the first source of

information and Seeger's (2006) best practice of meeting the needs of the media. The team did this by making sure to comment, at the very least, on the status of Rice's position with the team throughout this phase. To certain audiences, fans especially, this would be important information, and providing this information meets these best practices while also showing concern for those fans' interests, thereby meeting another best practice of Seeger (2006). Last, as touched on above, team statements in the latter part of the phase also demonstrate Seeger's (2006) recommendations to exhibit candor and to accept uncertainty. By hedging their statements with comments about future information about this case, the Ravens appeared candid and open with the public while also showing acceptance in the uncertainty of the future, and thus meeting these two standards as well.

Interestingly, during this phase, there was an absence of any image restoration strategies in these statements, which speaks to the Ravens' attitude toward this incident. In almost every instance, statements put out by the team functioned to (1) acknowledge that the incident occurred, (2) to assure general audiences that Rice will stay with the team, and (3) to offer support to Rice and of Rice's character. None of these functions attempted to deny the event took place, relieve responsibility or offensiveness of the event, or promise to fix anything after the event. If any strategy could be linked to the general response of the team, that strategy could be characterized as partially shifting the blame with a refocusing component. The analysis showed that as the phase continued on, and additional information and events connected to the February 15th incident came out, the comments changed slightly from general support to remarks focusing on Rice personally. For example, the Ravens stated after the indictment, "We know there is more

to Ray Rice than this one incident” (Wesseling, 2014, para. 7) and Bisciotti specifically mentioned how “disappointing” and “embarrassing” this ordeal had been for the Rices (Mink, 2014). These remarks, while appearing supportive of Rice, also functioned to remind and refocus audiences as to *who* committed the actions that are being talked about. Rhetorically, while the NFL said nothing at all, the Ravens employed language that suggested the team felt no responsibility for Rice’s actions and attempted to remind audiences that despite their support of Rice, Rice’s actions were his alone.

Over the next weeks and months, the Ravens continued to respond to this crisis as they did in the first week. Nearly five weeks after the event, Ravens team owner, Steve Bisciotti, released a statement saying, “I know how terribly disappointing it is to Ray and his fiancée, how embarrassing it is for them. I have to have compassion towards him” (Mink, 2014, para. 4). Bisciotti also stated that despite reports of additional video footage of the incident that “He’ll [Rice] be back with the team. He’ll definitely be back” (Mink, 2014, para. 7). After Rice’s indictment, the Ravens released another supportive statement saying, “This is part of the due process for Ray. We know there is more to Ray Rice than this one incident” (Downing, 2014b, para. 4). Later in May of 2014, the Ravens organized a press conference for Ray and Janay Rice (this is after their marriage) where both individuals released statements apologizing for their conduct on the morning of February 15th (Baltimore Sun, 2014). The consistency with which Ravens officials provided statements, but also stuck to their support of Rice, illustrates two things throughout this phase. First, the continued absence of image restoration strategies in the team press statements showed that the Ravens never, at least publicly, considered this incident a crisis threatening the team. Indeed, such actions as speaking of the Rices’

embarrassment and disappointment, and setting up a press conference where the Rices both publicly apologized for the incident functioned to keep the focus on them and their responsibility in the matter. At the same time, the Ravens' relative success in responding to the media with such consistency helped provide support for Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) best practice regarding crisis response as a narrative. In order to make sense, narratives require consistency and coherence, and the Ravens provided a consistent and coherent message of support, which provided audiences with information about how the team viewed the incident without having to make clear statements of judgment or discipline.

However, it is this same concept of narrative consistency that highlighted the relative silence of the NFL during this period. While the Ravens function as their own organization and franchise within the NFL, as the overarching and governing body of the collective team franchises, "Rice is subject to league review for violating its personal conduct policy," (Corbett, 2014, para. 12) which means that the NFL would eventually have to acknowledge and respond both to Rice and the general public about this incident to remain consistent with its own policy. Yet, despite this eventual outcome, the NFL made no attempt to initiate any conversation about Rice's personal crisis during this time. The only public acknowledgement, by the NFL, of the Ray Rice incident prior to July of 2014 came in March at the NFL Annual Meeting when Commissioner Goodell, in response to questions about suspending Rice, Goodell said, "I don't have any timetable... The federal authorities are working on it, so I don't have any inside knowledge of that from anyone. But there's no reason to take any action as of now" (Wesseling, 2014, para. 10). From this statement, Goodell indicates no intention of stepping into this crisis, or

acknowledging the role the NFL will eventually play in responding to a serious breach of league policy. Thus, Goodell's only response during the first phase of this crisis is to attempt to dissociate the league from Rice and his conduct until the legal system had completed its work.

Phase Two: His Bad

After Rice's acceptance into the diversionary program on May 20th, and his and Janay's meeting with Goodell on June 16th, this crisis reached a turning point on July 24, 2014, when Goodell, as NFL Commissioner, broke the NFL's silence on the matter, and seemingly out of nowhere, released a statement announcing that Rice was suspended for the first two games of the 2014 season and would also be fined an additional game as penalty for violating the Personal Conduct Policy of the league (Brigidi, 2014). This announcement used an interesting combination of corrective action, shifting the blame, and bolstering response strategies as first tactics for responding to this crisis. The announcement stated boldly as its title "RAY RICE SUSPENDED WITHOUT PAY FOR TWO GAMES AND FINED AN ADDITIONAL GAME CHECK FOR VIOLATING NFL PERSONAL CONDUCT POLICY" (Brigidi, 2014, para. 4). The bold print, prominent placing, and language used, suggested the NFL was attempting to demonstrate corrective action to respond to this crisis. This observation was further supported later in the announcement when it stated, "Despite the court's decision not to impose criminal punishment, the Commissioner determined, as he advised Rice, that the conduct was incompatible with NFL policies and warranted disciplinary action" (Brigidi, 2014, para. 4). Pairing these two statements, it seemed the NFL was also attempting to

bolster its image by taking desired action where the legal system did not. Further on in the announcement, the NFL stated,

The league is an entity that depends on the integrity and in the confidence of the public and we simply cannot tolerate conduct that endangers others or reflects negatively on our game. This is particularly true with respect to domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. (Brigidi, 2014, para. 4)

This statement appeared to function both to distinguish between the conduct of the NFL and the conduct exhibited by Rice, but also to further bolster the image of the NFL because it upheld the socially accepted ethics regarding nonviolence towards women. Then, to reinforce this distinction between player and league, the NFL used the same combination of quasi-shifting the blame and refocusing tactics as used by the Ravens team officials to subtly position the NFL on the side of the public and not with Rice. The organization did this by including in the press release parts of a personal letter sent from Goodell to Rice which repeatedly referenced Rice's culpability and responsibility: "As *you* acknowledged during our meeting, *your* conduct was unquestionably inconsistent with the league", "*You* will be expected to continue to take advantage of the counseling and other professional service", "I believe that *you* are sincere in your desire to learn from this matter" (Brigidi, 2014, para. 4).

Unfortunately for the NFL, and Goodell, this first official statement met significant criticism from the media, women's groups, and several state politicians (Belson, 2014a; Fitzgerald, 2014; Van Natta and Van Valkenburg, 2014). Just a week after the release of the first statement, Goodell had to respond to questions about the Rice case and his suspension decision while at the NFL Hall of Fame in Canton, OH. When

asked how he determined the two-game suspension, Goodell claimed that “you look at all of the facts that you have available” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell – Media,” 2014). He also noted, “Law enforcement normally... has more information, facts” before saying, “The criminal justice system, as you know, put him in a diversionary program with no discipline, and we felt it was appropriate to have discipline” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell – Media,” 2014). Here, Goodell admitted that the legal system often has more information with which to make informed decisions, yet in this instance, the NFL had enough information to feel the legal outcome of this case did not reflect appropriate action. However, in the very next statement, after being asked about the public criticism to the punishment Goodell did give Rice, Goodell tried to explain his good intentions saying, “When we make decisions we always get reactions. We understand that, we listen to it, and we use it to make ourselves better” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell – Media,” 2014). Taken together, it seemed that Goodell’s attempts to bolster the NFL’s image by juxtaposing the NFL’s action in punishing Rice with the legal system’s supposed inaction in not punishing him did little to meet its intended purpose.

The argument that Goodell’s first two attempts to respond to the Ray Rice crisis were not sufficient is affirmed three weeks later when he released a letter to all NFL owners about domestic violence policy in the league. As a whole, the letter moved through five stages. First, the very beginning of the letter started off with a commitment by Goodell to the game and the sport, saying, “My focus has been on ensuring that the NFL is held in the highest regard... [and] my commitment has always been to do what is right and to protect the integrity of the game” (Gantt, 2014, para. 1). Next, Goodell made

statements approaching mortification when he stated, “My disciplinary decision led the public to question our sincerity, our commitment... I take responsibility both for the decision and for ensuring that our actions in the future properly reflect our values. I didn’t get it right” (Gantt, 2014, para. 3). Still, despite taking ownership for the botched crisis response, Goodell did not fully commit to mortification since he did not expressly ask forgiveness. Goodell did attempt to make amends when moving into the third stage of the letter, which demonstrated corrective action for the previous transgression. The next several paragraphs listed promises of future commitment and action to correct the issues exposed by this crisis. Goodell promised,

We will listen openly, engage our critics constructively, and seek continuous improvement... We will use this opportunity to create a positive outcome by promoting policies of respect for women both within and outside the workplace. We will work with nationally recognized experts to ensure that the NFL has a model policy on domestic violence. (Gantt, 2014, para. 4)

Goodell also demonstrated what corrective actions he had already taken, explaining,

In the past few weeks, I have reviewed all aspects of our Personal Conduct Policy and met with a wide range of experts... as well as with the NFLPA and many of you. Those discussion will continue. They have helped us to identify a number of steps that will better communicate our position and strengthen our policies. (Gantt, 2014, para. 5)

As he listed several specific steps that the league will undertake to demonstrate

corrective action, Goodell also started to incorporate elements of transcendence, primarily by trying to show how the community will benefit from the league going through this crisis. Goodell wrote

Outside groups we met with have emphasized that the NFL can play an important role in communities throughout the nation. Consistent with that advice, we will expand the educational components in our college, high school and youth football programs that address domestic violence and sexual assault... In the coming months, we will explore meaningful ways to incorporate domestic violence and sexual assault awareness and prevention into our public service work. (Gantt, 2014, para. 11-12).

These promises not only offered corrective action but they also argued how the NFL can claim transcendence from this crisis by taking what was learned from this crisis and benefiting the greater community, especially the youth, with this new knowledge. Despite this rhetoric of growth and transcendence, Goodell ended his letter by attempting to reduce the negativity toward his unpopular two-game suspension decision by using differentiation and minimization tactics. Goodell packaged this tactic by presenting the new policies and penalties regarding domestic violence in the Personal Conduct Policy. However, he made sure to go into detail about what actions will merit harsher penalties than the ones outlined in the new policy. Specifically, he mentioned, “Among the circumstances that would merit a more severe penalty would be a prior incident before joining the NFL, or violence involving a weapon, choking, repeated striking, or when the act is committed against a pregnant women or in the presence of a child” (Gantt, 2014, para. 13). Then Goodell went on to say, “With very few exceptions, NFL personnel

conduct themselves in an exemplary way” (Gantt, 2014, para. 14). Thus, the first statement attempted to reduce the offensiveness of the perceived leniency of the suspension by pointing out all the conditions that could have made a similar assault seem worse than the one Rice perpetrated. The second statement functioned to minimize the negative backlash on the NFL by pointing out that the organization is made up of many individuals who conduct themselves in acceptable and ethical ways.

Taking Phase Two communications and applying Heath’s (2006) best practices helped to draw attention to several significant failures in the NFL’s crisis response. The first prominent issue in this phase was timing itself. The lengthy time gap between the inciting incident and the first NFL response violated four of Seeger’s (2006) and Heath’s (2006) recommended practices. Heath (2006) argued that crisis response should be viewed as a narrative with beginning, middle, and end. By responding for the first time with corrective action five months after the initial event that started the crisis, the NFL appeared to be stepping into the crisis while completely out of touch with the demands called for in its crisis response. The organization appeared out of touch with the narrative timeline by responding definitively but not adequately (based on the media criticism that came afterwards) with corrective action after months of silence and avoidance of the crisis, especially when the Ravens officials had consistently been addressing the crisis since the beginning. Thus, to the public, the action taken to suspend Rice, though inevitable since the NFL is the governing body, likely seemed to come out of no where and the organization did nothing to build up or explain its logic with previous (non)responses. The organization also appeared out of touch with how this crisis had progressed and what the various organizational audiences expected from the NFL’s crisis

response, as was displayed with the notable backlash following the two-game suspension. This timing also failed to meet the needs of the media, which continued to highlight this crisis throughout the months of silence from the NFL, allowing these outlets to control the story coming out about the crisis. Taken altogether, these failings also demonstrated a lack of planning or policy development and evaluation by the organization in order to be prepared for such a crisis. This lack of planning and development neglects Seeger's (2006) first two principles of constantly reevaluating and refining policy and pre-planning for any possible crisis that could occur.

Besides the timing itself, the initial response of the two-game suspension worked to violate another four of Seeger's (2006) 10 best practices. Seeger (2006) suggested that organizations view their public relationships as partnerships, and argued that crisis can even foster mutually beneficial relationships. However, Seeger (2006) stipulated that partnerships rely on quality communication to strengthen that relationship, and the two-game suspension communication was met with so much suspicion and animosity by so many different audiences, it was clear that the crisis response did not reflect the quality expected by the public. Additionally, Seeger (2006) recommended demonstrating respect, concern, and aligned interests, but also to communicate compassion and empathy. The criticism following the announcement of the two-game suspension and the subsequent letter sent to the NFL team owners demonstrated how the response failed to communicate these qualities, which were an even more significant requirement considering the nature of the crisis and the victims this crisis was addressing. Last, Seeger (2006) also highlighted the importance of using messages of self-efficacy to show strength and boost confidence. If the intention of the NFL was to demonstrate self-efficacy by coming out

with the suspension before any other communication, then they also failed on this best practice since the response only served to bring suspicion to the organization about their handling of this crisis.

While the NFL did show a considerable lack of aptitude where crisis response was concerned, Goodell did show some improvement in his final communication in this phase. Goodell's letter to the NFL team owners may not explicitly show, but it did promise to commit to actions that will meet two of Seeger's (2006) practices. By starting to listen to and engage with critics, the NFL showed a desire to meet Seeger's (2006) fourth best practice of listening to others. Secondly, by stating that the NFL will work with experts to improve both organizational policies and educational programs, the NFL also showed a resolve to meet Seeger's (2006) sixth best practice of collaborating with credible sources to strengthen and bring legitimacy to the crisis response and the organization. Taken together, these promises can also function to meet the best practice of messages of self-efficacy, which can help to ameliorate the lack of attempt at self-efficacy in the first crisis response. However, at this point in the crisis narrative, only time and additional organizational communications will tell if these promises actually meet the standards they represent.

Phase Three: Our Bad

For this analysis, Phase 3 began with the next significant event to alter the subject of the NFL's crisis responses. This happened when TMZ released a second video on the morning of September 8, 2014, with footage from inside the hotel elevator, which showed Rice purposely punching Janay in the face ("Key events," 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). The next day "TMZ reports the NFL never contacted the casino

to request video” of the incident inside the elevator (“Key events,” 2014, para. 23). The release of the video and TMZ’s accusations not only stirred new suspicions around the NFL’s handling of this crisis with headlines like “Crisis of the Week: NFL’s Handling of Ray Rice Scandal” (DiPietro, 2014) and “Ray Rice Story Slams NFL Image: ‘It’s like people are smelling blood’” (Fenno, 2014), but it also put the organization back in the position of defending its seemingly lackluster actions rather than releasing statements that demonstrated control of the situation. The NFL immediately responded to the video release by suspending Rice from the league indefinitely (“Key events,” 2014; Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014), and by releasing a statement to CNN through the organization’s Vice President of Corporate Communications, Brian McCarthy (“Key events,” 2014). McCarthy used a combination of defeasibility and shifting the blame when he said,

Security for Atlantic City casinos is handled by the New Jersey State Policy. Any videos related to an ongoing criminal investigation are held in the custody of the state police...We requested from law enforcement any and all information about the incident, including the video from inside the elevator. That video was not made available to us. (“Key events,” 2014, para. 23)

McCarthy’s comments appeared to argue that any decisions made by the NFL up to that point were made based on a lack of information which was based on a lack of access to the second video footage, and that this lack of access was not the fault of the NFL but was simply part of the policy and procedure followed by law enforcement and the legal system.

To reinforce this argument, on Wednesday, September 10, 2014, Goodell sat down with *CBS This Morning* co-host, Norah O'Donnell, to answer questions raised after the TMZ release of the elevator video. O'Donnell asked Goodell at the start if the NFL had seen the second video, and Goodell used simple denial to answer the question, but he also used the same shifting the blame strategy as McCarthy when he explained, "We were not granted that [elevator footage]. We were told that was not something we could have access to. On multiple occasions, we asked for it. And on multiple occasions we were told no" (CBS News, 2014, para. 6). When asked how TMZ could get the video but the NFL could not, Goodell responded with a variation of attacking the accuser, "I don't know how TMZ... gets their information. We are particularly reliant on law enforcement. That's the most reliable. It's the most credible" (CBS News, 2014, para. 10). With this, Goodell threw suspicion on how ethical TMZ's tactics to gain the video were, insinuating it did not go through appropriate legal channels while also reinforcing the organization's argument that any perceived shortcoming on the organization's part regarding this video was the outcome of following the law and its limitations.

Goodell's interview with O'Donnell continued to also use defeasibility strategies when asked about Rice's two-game suspension in light of the elevator video. Goodell explained, "When we make a decision we want to have all the information that's available. And obviously that was the – that when we met with Ray Rice and his representative, it was ambiguous about what actually happened" (CBS News, 2014, para.14). In a new twist, Goodell suggested here, that the NFL not only did not have all the information because of legal procedure, but that Rice himself did not provide a

completely clear account of the events that took place when Rice met with Goodell back in June.

The rest of the interview included several contradictions by Goodell where O'Donnell asked him a clarification question and Goodell responded in direct contradiction to what he previously stated. For example, Goodell commented that he wished he had seen the elevator footage before making his decision about the two-game suspension because of the ambiguity of the situation, to which O'Donnell responded, "But what was ambiguous about her laying unconscious on the floor being dragged out by her feet" (CBS News, 2014, para. 15). Goodell responded to this, "There was nothing ambiguous about that. That was the result that we saw. We did not know what led up to that. We did not know the details of that" (CBS News, 2014, para. 16). O'Donnell then asked, "But what changed?... Did you really need to see a videotape of Ray Rice punching her in the face to make this decision" (CBS News, 2014, para. 17). Goodell answered, "No. We certainly didn't. And I will tell you that what we saw on the first videotape was troubling to us in and of itself" (CBS News, 2014, para. 18). To sum up this interview, after denying *anyone* in the NFL had seen the elevator video, Goodell first blamed law enforcement and the legal system and then Ray Rice for the apparent failures to respond appropriately to the crisis. Then, Goodell went through a series of questions where he attempted to explain the lack of information, only to back track and say that the organization actually had all the information it needed from the first video to know how bad the situation was.

On the same day as the CBS interview, Goodell also released an official memorandum to all Chief Executives and Club Presidents in the league. This response

showed a second attempt by the NFL to provide a consistent and organizationally approved message regarding the NFL's Ray Rice investigation. The memo started out just as the interview, with a direct and simple denial of anyone seeing the elevator footage before its release by TMZ (Goodell, 2014). Goodell followed this up with a quick statement showing corrective action, "When the new video evidence became available, we [NFL] acted promptly and imposed an indefinite suspension on Mr. Rice" (Goodell, 2014, para. 2). Goodell went on to restate the same arguments used by both he and McCarthy since the second video release. Goodell attempted to shift blame by listing all the law enforcement agencies the organization requested information and videos from and when those requests were made (Goodell, 2014). He also reaffirmed his defeasibility statement about Rice's two-game suspension arguing, "As is customary in disciplinary cases, the suspension imposed on Mr. Rice in July was based on the information available to us at that time" (Goodell, 2014, para. 3).

Goodell finished out this communication with a combination of minimizing and bolstering strategies. He tried to minimize the perceived lack of effort to obtain information and video footage by reframing this result as an outcome of cooperating with law enforcement. Goodell (2014) states, "Our longstanding policy in matters like this – where there is a criminal investigation being directed by law enforcement and prosecutors – is to cooperate with law enforcement and take no action to interfere with the criminal justice system" (para. 5). He added to this, "Information obtained outside of law enforcement that has not been tested by prosecutors or by the court system is not necessarily a reliable basis for imposing league discipline" (Goodell, 2014, para. 5). This last sentence is important because it functioned as multiple strategies. It helps to

minimize offensiveness by again reframing the NFL's actions as "the right thing to do" because they work alongside the law. It also tied back to the attack the accuser tactic used in the interview to again bring suspicion on the credibility of media outlets (e.g., TMZ) that might not follow the law when obtaining information. Last, the statement also functioned as a statement of transcendence because Goodell argued that to ensure that discipline imposed by the league is honest, credible, and fair, all values favored by American standards of ethics, he had to pursue credible and legal avenues for obtaining information.

This line of crisis response did not last long as media coverage continued to speculate on the behavior and actions of the NFL prior to the release of the second video. This speculation reached a pinnacle when *ESPN's* television program *Outside the Lines* released the findings of their own investigative report on Friday, September 19, 2014. On the program's website, the report provided 14 pages of specific dates and actions by both the Ravens and the NFL in response to the initial event in February (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). Among the many arguments in the report, of most importance were the claims that personnel inside the Ravens team viewed and conversed about the contents of the elevator video footage before its release in September, the NFL made only minimal attempts to obtain the second video footage, NFL arguments stating that obtaining this video footage from the hotel would be illegal were discredited, and overall the report implied an intentional misdirection by the Ravens and the NFL to cover up some aspects of the incident between Rice and Palmer (Van Natta & Van Valkenburg, 2014). After the release of this report, the NFL's ability to deny, justify, or transcend the

actions (and inactions) which led to this point were irreparably damaged, therefore leading to the most significant change in crisis response strategy in this crisis narrative.

Later in the afternoon on that same day, the NFL held a public press conference responding to this most recent event in the crisis, but what was most significant was the complete change in response tactics. In this response, Goodell used a few response strategies outlined by Benoit (1995), but it was this press conference when the NFL fundamentally switched gears and began its atonement campaign. Goodell started this campaign almost immediately at the beginning of his speech when he said, “At our best, the NFL sets an example that makes a positive difference. Unfortunately over the past several weeks, we have seen all too much of the NFL doing wrong” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference,” 2014, para. 2). While not providing any specifics, Goodell did not attempt to deny, reduce, or transcend any issues; he simply admitted that the organization had done wrong, thereby meeting the first requirement for atonement rhetoric. Goodell did acknowledge this wrongdoing in more detail later in his speech when he said,

Our standards, and the consequences of falling short, must be clear, consistent, and current. They must be implemented through procedures that are fair and transparent. This is the central issue today. I’m here now because our rules, policies, and procedures on personal conduct failed to ensure that this high standard is met. (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference,” 2014, para. 16-17)

Following this first requirement of atonement, Goodell next met the third and fourth requirements for atonement, which were demonstrating honest change for the

future, and committing public or private acts of mortification to show authenticity of remorse (Koesten & Rowland, 2004). Immediately after acknowledging the wrongdoing, Goodell stated, “I said this before, back on August 28th, and I say it again now – I got it wrong in the handling of the Ray Rice matter. I am sorry for that” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference,” 2014, para. 3). Goodell provided evidence of mortification by publicly apologizing for the organization’s failures. Here again, Goodell did not specifically ask forgiveness for the transgression, but the intention was implied when he also committed in his speech to partner with the National Domestic Violence Hotline and with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center to help those organizations that represent a particular segment of the “wronged” victims in this crisis. This statement was reinforced later on September 28, 2014, when Goodell visited the headquarters of the National Domestic Violence Hotline to personally view their operation after the NFL made “a multiyear, multimillion dollar pledge of assistance” to the organization (Associated Press, 2014, para. 2). This public visit and charitable commitment demonstrated the NFL’s attempts to publicly seek atonement and the organization’s commitment to honest change for the future, thus displaying the third and fifth requirements for atonement.

In his speech, Goodell verbalized the NFL’s attempt to show sincere change in attitude and relationship with the community when he said, “I will get it right and do whatever is necessary to accomplish that. First, I don’t expect anyone just to take my word” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference,” 2014, para. 5). He recognized the distrustful effect of the many events that had come out of this crisis, so he further tried to show the league’s commitment to change by listing the many changes to be

implemented (corrective actions). Goodell promised that an independent investigation into the NFL handling of this crisis would be launched and run by a former FBI Director, Robert Mueller, he reiterated his commitment to providing information about resources to all NFL personnel, and to improving policies and educational programs with the collaboration of experts in these areas (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference,” 2014). Goodell ended the conference with another show of commitment by giving the organization a specific deadline of Superbowl 2015, approximately four and a half months, to have accomplished all of these changes, and by saying, “I believe in accountability. I understand the challenge before me and I will be held accountable for meeting it” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference,” 2014, para. 30).

Phase Three in this crisis provided the most interesting juxtaposition between neglect and merit regarding Seeger’s (2006) and Heath’s (2006) best practices. Marking a new low for the NFL in this crisis, after the second video release by TMZ and the investigative report released by *ESPN’s Outside the Lines*, the NFL’s crisis response appeared a complete failure with the organization failing to meet nearly all best practices. The most significant practice neglected by the NFL was Heath’s (2006) twelfth recommendation: “Be committed and able to deliver on the promise to be the first and best source of information” (p. 248). While the NFL never promised to be the best source of information, as these two releases demonstrated, by not being the best media resource, an organization loses the ability to control what story comes out in a crisis, it also puts the organization in a defensive and reactionary position as opposed to a stronger offensive position, and an organization runs the risk of appearing irresponsible, and even unethical, in the public eye. By not being the first to admit to the existence of the second video, the

subsequent release and storyline weakened the NFL's position and reputation in the public eye. The organization appeared to fail to meet the needs of the media by allegedly holding back information. Withholding this particular information also neglected the partnership the organization had with its publics, and demonstrated a complete lack of respect, concern, compassion, or empathy for those publics, especially victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault. In this way, the NFL seemed utterly unable to get its response to this crisis right.

With its image in shambles and its ethical reputation, if not its profitability, on the line, the NFL made a dramatic turn around in rhetorical strategy by beginning to use atonement rhetoric. In using this form a rhetoric to convey a significant change in the organization and the crisis from this point forward, the organization also begins to meet the recommendations by Seeger (2006) and Heath (2006) as it meets the requirements for atonement. The NFL held the press conference the same day as the release of the *Outside the Line*'s report. Thus, the organization demonstrated how to meet the needs of the media by immediately responding to the new threat. In terms of policy, Goodell made the statements that policies must be current and that the organization will work with appropriate experts to make sure they are both current and effective ("NFL commissioner Roger Goodell conference," 2014). Promising these two things demonstrated Seeger's (2006) best practices for committing to periodically reevaluate policies and to collaborate with experts in order to lend credibility to those policies. In listing off the many changes he promised to enact, Goodell showed both that he had listened to others and that he and the NFL were capable of acting with self-efficacy. Last, pledging support to the national domestic and sexual abuse organizations demonstrated the NFL's attempts to foster new

partnerships, which also symbolize an alliance of aligned interests as well as a respect and compassion for the people who identify with these organizations.

Phase Four: Getting Better

For crisis response analysis, Phase Four in this crisis did not offer a noteworthy amount of variety. In fact, this phase only contained statements meant to show the league's continued commitment to atonement with messages aimed at demonstrating a clear commitment to change within the organization and opening communication with the organization's publics. Meeting these particular aspects of atonement were particularly important at this time, in light of events that took place after the NFL admitted wrongdoing at the end of September.

After the NFL's admission of guilt during the September press conference, Rice applied for an appeal of the indefinite suspension passed down by Goodell after the release of the in-elevator video. The appeal was overseen by former U.S. District Judge, Barbara S. Jones, who heard the appeal over two days and released a 17-page report not just reinstating Rice, but calling serious question to the motives and ethics of Goodell and the NFL organization (Belson, 2014; O'Connor, 2014). In her report, Jones called Goodell's decision to indefinitely suspend Rice "'arbitrary' and in conflict with the facts of the case" (Belson, 2014, para. 1). She also questioned the "vagueness" of Goodell's recalling of his meeting with Rice in June of 2014 to discuss the incident (O'Connor, 2014, para. 9). Last, with Goodell's entire argument in the arbitration hearing hinging on the belief that Rice misrepresented the events of February 15th, after siding with Rice and questioning Goodell's lack of proof, Jones also wrote in her report, "That the league did not realize the severity of the conduct without a visual record also speaks to their

admitted failure in the past to sanction this type of conduct more severely” (Belson, 2014, para. 8). Altogether, these remarks, coming after a public admonition of guilt and failure, continued to damage the ethical reputation of the NFL.

Thus, in order to continue on the path of atonement, and in an attempt to rebuild its image and reputation as an ethical organization, the NFL continued to act to attempt to transcend the crisis into December 2014 and January 2015, by focusing on its ongoing efforts to learn from and change after the crisis. The first prominent release came on December 10, 2014 in which the organization published a public communication to its website announcing that all NFL teams had unanimously endorsed a revised Personal Conduct Policy with changes made based on shortcomings highlighted by the Ray Rice crisis. In conjunction with this announcement, the organization also posted a second communication on its website with links to seven different communications including: the new Personal Conduct Policy, a quick sheet with key elements of the new policy, a listing of individuals appointed to the newly formed Conduct Committee, a list of individuals, professionals, and advocate organizations consulted in the process of making these changes, a quick sheet on additional steps the NFL is taking beyond the new policy, a quick sheet on how the new Personal Conduct Policy will function during investigations of misconduct, and the NFL’s mission and values statements (“Information on the new personal conduct policy,” 2014).

Within the first communication announcing the changes, the NFL took every opportunity to publicly demonstrate honest change. The organization explained that it had a formal policy for off-field conduct for nearly 20 years, and that the most recent changes will enhance the policy so “that it is significantly more robust, thorough, and formal”

(“NFL teams unanimously endorse,” 2014, para. 4). In addition to this, the organization also enumerated the many changes it was making as corrective action after the crisis. The first communication as well as the quick sheet “What the NFL is Doing”, both mentioned increased information, education, and medical and counseling resources for all organizational personnel and their families (“NFL teams unanimously endorse,” 2014; “What the NFL is Doing,” 2014). The quick sheet also mentioned the new partnership between the NFL and the National Domestic Violence Hotline and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, as well as a new partnership with the NO MORE campaign and the Joyful Heart Foundation to create and air Public Service Announcements regarding domestic violence during league games (“What the NFL is Doing,” 2014).

In providing these informational resources on its public website, the NFL was also demonstrating commitment to show sincere change in attitude and relationship along with honest change for the future. Regarding attitude change, the organization’s attempts to keep providing information about its changes showed part of that desired attitude change called for in atonement. The language used to talk about how the organization will conduct itself moving forward also marked this change. For example, “It is a privilege to be part of the National Football League. **Everyone** who is part of the league must refrain from conduct detrimental to the integrity of and public confidence in the NFL” (“NFL teams unanimously endorse,” 2014, para. 6). This statement was interesting because the organization was no longer trying to minimize the situation by pointing out how the majority of the league members act as opposed to a few individuals. Instead, the league was stating that appropriate conduct is a responsibility that each member should take seriously as a privileged member of the organization.

In terms of honest change for the future, the NFL emphasized in its quick sheet on the new Personal Conduct Policy, that the aim of the organization was to not simply provide resources for individuals and families after domestic violence has happened, but to prevent the attitudes and actions that allow domestic violence to occur through more education, specialized trainings, and counseling services (“Key elements of new,” 2014). Providing an electronic copy of the Personal Conduct Policy and a quick sheet explaining how the policy works during investigations also demonstrated the organization’s commitment to open and transparent communication by creating more formalized policies and procedures, and then making them available to organizational personnel, general publics, and the media, so everyone can know and understand the changes prior to new incidents.

The next, and last, important communication in this phase was published on January 8, 2015, when former FBI Director, Robert S. Mueller, released his report looking into the NFL’s handling of the Ray Rice crisis, and specifically addressing whether or not officials within the NFL had seen the second in-elevator video prior to its TMZ release early in September of 2014. The report concluded that there was not enough evidence to prove that the NFL had viewed the footage and knowingly lied about it (Mueller, 2015). However, far from exonerating the NFL, the report functioned more as a closure but not an eraser. Actually, the report cited several key shortcomings in the NFL’s investigation, which could have changed several outcomes in the crisis. Chiefly, the report found, “The League’s investigation was limited, but it possessed substantial information suggesting a serious event had occurred inside the elevator that the League should have further investigated” and that while “That information did not provide the

graphic detail that the in-elevator video depicted... it should have put the League on notice that a serious assault had occurred and that it should conduct a more substantial independent investigation” (Mueller, 2015, p. 6). In its findings, the report stated,

Our findings demonstrate the weakness inherent in the League’s longstanding practice of deferring to the criminal justice system with respect to the investigation of facts and the imposition of discipline under the Personal Conduct Policy. Discipline should be imposed on the basis of the specific nature of the player’s conduct, not solely or necessarily on the disposition of a criminal case. (Mueller, 2014, pp. 8-9).

These statements were significant for two reasons. First, the NFL used its “longstanding practice of deferring to the criminal justice system” (Mueller, 2015, p. 8) as a defeasibility strategy when responding to several points in the crisis including: why the organization had not seen the second video and why it made the two-game suspension. Second, the last sentence in the Mueller statement acted as quite an admonishment to the organization, and seemingly discredited the organization’s initial bolstering tactic of pointing out that it disciplined Rice only when the criminal justice system did not.

Despite the minimal help the report offered in rebuilding the NFL’s image, the organization and Goodell stayed committed to its atonement rhetoric. Goodell released a statement the same day as the report where he expressed his gratitude to Mueller for conducting the investigation, and he also made a point to express the organization’s acceptance of the reports findings and recommendations (“Statement by commissioner,” 2015). Goodell also included a message of self-efficacy when pointing out, “We have already addressed many of these points [Mueller’s recommendations] in the revision to

the Personal Conduct Policy that were announced last month” (“Statement by commissioner,” 2015, para. 1). This statement acted to confirm the organization’s commitment to honest change, demonstrating that the organization was actually making progress on the promises made in the previous phase. In the end, to conclude his statements, Goodell further demonstrated that sincere change for the future by reiterating,

While this investigation has now concluded, our focus on the underlying issues and our commitment to positive change remain as strong as ever. We have all learned a great deal in the past months and expect to be judged by how we lead going forward on issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. (“Statement by commissioner,” 2015, para. 2).

As Phase Four closed, analysis showed how the NFL, by embracing atonement rhetoric, showed much more success in meeting the principles set forth in Seeger (2006) and Heath (2006). Several of the December 10th communications demonstrated the best practice of periodically reevaluating process approaches and policy development. The organization’s communication on “Conduct Committee” specifically stated, “To ensure that this policy [new Personal Conduct Policy] remains current and consistent with best practices and evolving legal and social standards, the Commissioner has named a Conduct Committee... [which] will meet no less than three times per year” (para. 1-2). This statement also acknowledged the potential for change, thus also showing Seeger’s (2006) best practice of accepting uncertainty and ambiguity. The new Personal Conduct Policy’s focus on prevention touched on the best practice for pre-event planning; even if the policy was not specifically planning for a crisis, its revisions attempt to mitigate future crises of the same conditions. Including the list of experts and organizations

collaborated with on these organizational changes also demonstrated Seeger's (2006) best practices of using crisis to build partnerships, listening to others, and collaborating with credible sources. Continuing to show organizational change and providing resources not just for personnel but also for their families also demonstrated the best practices of demonstrating respect and aligned interests with the community, along with communicating compassion and concern for those effected by the crisis (Seeger, 2006). Last, committing to providing this information to the media, also helps to meet the needs of the media and acknowledges the need for response in a crisis narrative, while also proving self-efficacy and that the organization is the best source for new information – thereby meeting all of Seeger's (2006) and Heath's (2006) 12 best practices.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Organizational crisis response, in the best of cases, is a complex balancing act in which the organization in crisis attempts to weigh the current situational damages with the potential costs and benefits attached to each potential avenue of crisis response, all while attempting to control information flow, seek new information and data, meet the needs of multiple organizational audiences, and determine what further risks exist. If this is a best-case scenario, then the NFL's crisis response in the Ray Rice crisis is an exemplary case study in exactly what not to do for crisis communication scholars and practitioners alike. From the analysis, this study finds nine different contributions, which can either support or add to previous literature.

First, Seeger et al. (2003) stated that organizational crises threaten organizations by threatening loss of "legitimacy, credibility, reputation, and income" (p. 4); however, most studies on organizational crisis focus on how initial failures in the operationalization or business management of an organization can lead to such threats. This study demonstrates how an organization is just as susceptible to these same losses if the organization should mishandle or poorly respond to the personal crisis of an individual member of that organization. Thus, it is important for crisis response scholars and personnel to understand that personal scandal for individual members, especially highly publicized members, can grow into an organizational crisis if it is not addressed promptly and in accordance with social moral standards.

It is this last understanding about appropriateness and social morals, which touches on a second finding from this study. As mentioned above, many crisis

communication studies have resulted in split conclusions regarding the effectiveness of certain crisis response strategies for certain crisis situations. Rowland and Jerome (2004) touch on this issue, specifically, and instead argue that crisis response should include four general elements: demonstrating concern for the victim, bolstering organizational values, denying intent to harm, and preventing future recurrence. This study helps to support that general framework. The NFL's crisis response in the first two phases, and even part way through phase three, does contain bolstering statements about organizational image and values, but lacks an overall demonstration of concern for domestic violence victims since the organization comes off as protecting Rice more than taking a hard stance against domestic abuse. The league's responses also lack any statements of intent in general, to say nothing of preventative measures until the organization embraces a rhetoric of atonement approach. It is only after the NFL attempts to demonstrate a sincere change in its attitude and relationship toward its community by publicly seeking atonement and showing changes for the future that the organization actually starts to rebuild its public image by using messages that meet the standards of Rowland and Jerome (2004), but also meet several of the best practices regarding showing concern, compassion, and aligned interests set out by Seeger (2006).

In addition to this, Rowland and Jerome (2004) also stipulate how certain additional factors, such as perceived guilt, magnitude of harm, nature of the victims, data showing guilt, and violation of traditional moral standards can all require the use of additional crisis response strategies in conjunction with the four general elements listed above. Interestingly, this study suggests that when an organization encounters not just one or two of these extenuating circumstances, but all of them, that an organization's best

course of action is to employ atonement rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, the NFL's guilt did not lie in participating in the events that took place between Rice and Palmer on February 15th. The NFL's guilt lies within its lack of appropriate response to the crisis. Goodell mentions on multiple occasions how the organization is seen as a social leader with various school and youth programs. So, to see a prominent organization, as a social leader, seemingly excuse such concrete evidence of domestic violence presents significant questions of harm not just toward detrimentally effecting social/moral understanding and acceptance of domestic violence, but also negatively influencing the youth in those school programs who look up to the individuals in the NFL as role models. With the release of the videos and the reports confirming that the NFL should have had enough knowledge to suspect Rice of a more purposeful intent to commit harm in that elevator, the organization appears even more guilty and the harms grow as the organization's meager suspension also seems to dismiss, on a more societal level, the pain and suffering that all domestic violence victims experience. Coming back from such a multi-layered transgression takes a more specific and strategic effort to show sincere organizational change, as through atonement strategies.

This brings the study's third and fourth findings into view. One of the most significant failings in this crisis was the NFL's complete inability to command control of the crisis for nearly 10 months. From February through November, the NFL, through instances of silence and unexpected news releases, constantly appeared to react to new information, and haphazardly at that, rather than trying to create and control the crisis narrative. Benoit (1995) and Heath (2006) both highlight the importance of how organizational crisis responses need to be strategic and well planned – not reactionary.

Coombs (1995) adds to this by stating that one of the express purposes of crisis response is for organizations to use those responses as opportunities to influence public perceptions about the organization and crisis. Thus, when Goodell refused to publicly acknowledge the Ray Rice situation for the first five months, and even justified his inaction by stating that the legal system had not yet passed judgment on the case, Goodell demonstrated an extreme ignorance of crisis communication, and lost prime opportunities to shape the crisis narrative to the NFL's benefit.

Throughout this crisis, the NFL showed a fundamental error in judging the appropriateness of its responses. Several scholars attempt to answer this question of "appropriateness" in crisis response while Seeger (2006) and Heath (2006) essentially provide a checklist for what messages "appropriate" crisis responses contain. Coombs (1995) found that the appropriateness of a crisis response is often dependent on the perceived responsibility and intentions of the organization in crisis. Another such study by Benoit and Drew (1997) found that audiences usually tend to favor strategies of corrective action and mortification while usually disliking strategies of bolstering, denial, and minimization. Within the Ray Rice crisis, the public response to each of the NFL's earliest responses supports both of these findings. The NFL's earliest responses focused heavily on the strategies of bolstering the organization's image, denying seeing the in-elevator footage prior to its public release, and minimizing the situation through various comparisons of Rice and other NFL members and of what Rice did versus what he could have done. In all cases, the strategies failed to satisfy public outrage because the arguments came too late in the crisis narrative and demonstrated no attempt by the NFL to listen to the concerns of the public or any demonstration of concern or compassion for

those who felt victimized by the crisis. Still more, even the NFL's use of corrective action backfired. From this example, the study can add to Benoit and Drew's (1997) findings with the caveat that corrective action, in order to work, should be proportioned in accordance with the transgression committed. In simpler terms, it is recommended that crisis responders keep in mind the old adage "let the punishment fit the crime". As seen in this case, the public greatly disapproved of the NFL's two-game suspension before the release of the in-elevator video, and after the release, the NFL was not just answering questions about why it made that decision, but also what its intentions were and what responsibility the organization has to its fans and society regarding messages of domestic and sexual abuse.

Coombs and Holladay (2002) offer an additional insight into this conversation of appropriateness and responsibility. Coombs and Holladay (2002) argue that an organization's reputation, the way it is perceived by the general public, is a valued organizational resource that is threatened in times of crisis. This is an interesting perspective when looking at the concepts of responsibility and appropriateness within the NFL case study. This discussion already mentions the unique circumstances that pulled the NFL into this crisis, but it also bears pointing out that the NFL never faced legal trouble or repercussions throughout this entire crisis. The one exception to this would be the arbitration hearing in November; however, that hearing was instigated by Rice and presented no legal repercussion other than simply reinstating him to the league. As a whole, the crisis, as it involved the NFL organization, largely addressed the organization's poor public response to Rice's personal transgression, thus resulting in accusations of misconduct by social moral standards. The crisis also never took place in a

judicial court, but only that of public opinion, thus demonstrating how organizational reputation is threatened in crisis and how it depends on public perception.

This look at public opinion also provides for an interesting discussion about one of the NFL's chief lines of argument throughout Phase Three before moving to atonement rhetoric. After the release of the in-elevator video, to respond to questions about how and why the NFL only suspended Rice for two games, Goodell used a defeasibility strategy, claiming that he and others in the NFL did not have enough information to know that a two-game suspension would be an inadequate penalty for Rice's actions in the elevator. Goodell argued that this lack of information stemmed from the organization's "longstanding" policy of working in cooperation with law enforcement and not interfering in criminal justice investigations, which resulted in NFL being unable to obtain video footage from inside the elevator. Based on reactions to the first responses in this phase containing these arguments, and the subsequent move to atonement rhetoric, public opinion suggested this was not an appropriate action or justification, and that cooperating with criminal and judicial organizations does not negate an organization's responsibility to investigate violations of its own policies to the organization's fullest extent and capability.

A discussion of responsibility will inevitably bring the findings of Kruse (1981) into the conversation. Kruse (1981) argued that apologia in team sports is ruled by a different set of norms and values than that of a general civic society. In team sports, the number one responsibility is winning, thus, any action that restricts or impedes this goal is cause for apologia. This exact principle is reflected in the language used by Goodell throughout this crisis. When looking at the function of a governing sports body, a team's

act of winning is doing exactly that, winning a game; a governing sports body's act of winning is ensuring certain conditions such as security, legitimacy, popularity, and profitability. Thus, an organization "loses" when it commits actions that can negatively impact these conditions. In this case study, the NFL's continued failure to address the public needs in this crisis threatened the organization's security, legitimacy, and potential popularity and profitability by violating societal moral standards. To amend this situation, Goodell did not just have to reaffirm the organization's commitment and adherence to widely accepted social values, but he also had to reaffirm his own commitment to ensuring those "winning" condition for football's players, coaches, owners, investors, and most importantly, for its fans. This is why Goodell makes comments about "ensuring that the NFL is held in the highest regard by our fans, players, business partners, and public authorities" (Gantt, 2014, para. 1) as early as Phase Two, but he reiterates these same sentiments in later phases as well.

This study's findings also support Jerome's (2008) modification of Koesten and Rowland's (2004) theory about atonement rhetoric. Again, as mentioned in the review of literature, one of the requirements in Koesten and Rowland's (2004) presentation of atonement rhetoric is the need for the responder to specifically ask forgiveness from those wronged in the crisis, though Jerome (2008) finds that atonement can still be achieved without an explicit request for forgiveness. Instead, the one using atonement rhetoric can still achieve the same effects of the strategy by appearing to receive forgiveness from relevant parties without necessarily asking for it (Jerome, 2008). This case study supports this modification since the NFL never made an explicit statement asking forgiveness, but in working with and receiving cooperation and collaboration from the National Domestic

Violence Hotline, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, the NO MORE campaign, and the Joyful Heart Foundation, the NFL appears to have received forgiveness from multiple national organizations that represent and work with, arguably, the most central group of “wronged” victims in this crisis – victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault.

Moving now to an example of how this study adds new understanding to previous literature, the crisis involving the NFL suggests a new best practice to be added to Heath’s (2006) list. This new best practice would highlight the importance of organizations to recognize the impact visual evidence, especially video footage, has on complicating crisis response while also increasing demand for an appropriate and timely response. In the NFL’s crisis, the organization was not in crisis because it did not release the video. The NFL found the crisis amplified because the public felt the organization did not try hard enough to obtain the second video footage, and the organization’s initial suspension to penalize Rice appeared paltry, even disrespectful and negligent, in light of that video. Visual evidence of misconduct provides a first-hand account of the events leading up to, during, and after an incident of misconduct, therefore potentially reducing the ambiguity of a situation and the number of ways it can be explained. Visual evidence also allows each viewer to witness and come to his or her own conclusions regarding the incident, therefore compounding the crisis response by attempting to respond in an appropriate and satisfactory manner to as many opinions as there are viewers of that evidence. Thus, this best practice would recommend that organizations not ignore or avoid the existence of *any* visual evidence, but that they exhaust all viable avenues for

obtaining such evidence in order to respond accordingly in their rhetoric and their corrective actions.

The last finding in this study brings support to Seeger et al.'s (2003) view that organizational crisis can act as both a positive and negative force. As a positive force, crisis can instigate change that might not have otherwise taken place or might not have occurred as quickly (Seeger et al., 2003). The NFL crisis involving Ray Rice demonstrates this, and Goodell even says this himself. In his September 19th press conference, Goodell talks about how this crisis can show how the NFL can “create change not only in... [the] league but in society” (“NFL commissioner Roger Goodell press”, 2014, para. 6). This argument is supported by the fact that the crisis resulted in many positive changes in policy development and implementation. The new Personal Conduct Policy received extensive improvements and clarifications after receiving no revisions since 2007 (“NFL teams unanimously endorse”, 2014). Additional educational, medical, and counseling resources have been added to the organizations list of services it will provide to all personnel, staff, and their families (“NFL teams unanimously endorse”, 2014). Last, this crisis has resulted in a renewed commitment by the NFL to be more proactive in assessing and preventing potential crises of this same nature by providing these resources, clarifying its definitions, rules, and penalties, and by promising to review all of these changes consistently and methodically with the input from multiple experts (“NFL teams unanimously endorse”, 2014).

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