

Psychologically gaining through losing: a metaphor analysis

Gaining
through losing

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper conceptualises how managers psychologically experience and respond to crises via metaphor analysis.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses a discourse dynamics approach to metaphor analysis. Conceptual metaphors were analysed and developed into concept maps through 37 semi-structured interviews with senior managers from different portfolios within 16 public universities in South Africa after #FeesMustFall protests.

Findings – Five domains emerged, including (1) looming crisis, (2) crisis onset, (3) crisis triage and containment, (4) (not) taking action and (5) post-crisis reflection. These domains shape a framework for the crisis adaptation cycle.

Practical implications – This study suggests that organisations should pay more attention to understanding emotions in crises and can use the adaptation model to develop their managers. It shows how metaphors can help explain affective and cognitive experiences and how emotions shift and evolve during a crisis. Managers should be aware of early signs of the crisis and its potential impact on their business operation in the looming and recognition stages, analyse the situation and work collectively on possible actions to minimise losses and maximise gains.

Originality/value – This is a rare investigation into the emotions of senior managers in the public sector in a social movement and national crisis via unconventional research methods to advance cognitive appraisal theory in crisis management.

Keywords Metaphor analysis, Crisis, Senior manager, Cognitive appraisal, Sensemaking

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the most profound crisis in our 21st century (Henderson *et al.*, 2023; Hochwarter *et al.*, 2022). Leadership and management in times of crisis have recently re-emerged in the psychology literature (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Lowman and Harms, 2022) due to their importance for the survival and development of not only organisations but also society (Sekiguchi and De Cuyper, 2022; Stoker *et al.*, 2019). The term “crisis” in Chinese, “weichi” (危机), is translated as “dangerous opportunity” (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). The ongoing tension between dangers and opportunities gives rise to the development of crisis management, where individuals, organisations and nations focus on minimising risks and maximising opportunities (Gigliotti, 2020). This study follows the ambiguity-centred approach to leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011) by not using the term “leader” because

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it causes a profound, largely unexamined concept of authority and power at work (Learmonth and Morrell, 2021). Instead, it uses senior managers.

The existing literature has not yet systematically investigated how senior managers in public sectors emotionally experience crises when the environment has become more complex and uncertain than ever (Yang and Huang, 2021). Their stress and adverse emotional experiences during crises can lead to poor decision-making (Treffers *et al.*, 2020) for organisations and the sector rather than maximising opportunities and minimising dangers. As a result, crises may be prolonged.

An organisational crisis is defined as “a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organisation and is characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (Pearson and Clair, 1998 p. 60). In the literature, the terms “crisis management” and “crisis leadership” are often used interchangeably when managers navigate through a crisis because it requires elements of both leadership and management (Collins *et al.*, 2023). In this study, we use crisis management to refer to both terms.

At the same time, emotion is often underestimated in crisis management. Emotion is a personal organised mental response to an event or entity (Izard, 1977). Lazarus (1991), the father of cognitive appraisal theory, believes that emotions are to apprehend states of the world that have significance for human beings. In other words, cognitive appraisal theory captures the subtle nuances of emotions by processing different cognitive appraisals (Chadwick, 2015). Building on cognitive appraisal theory, this study examines how senior managers use metaphors to express their emotional experiences during a national crisis resulting from a social movement that directly affected their organisations. In that crisis, they were both key actors and beneficiaries, experiencing *losses* and *gains* simultaneously (Lazarus, 1991). This study extends cognitive appraisal theory by looking beyond the cost-benefit approach, though it is based on the cost-benefit approach, to develop a crisis adaptation framework psychologically. The framework is expected to guide senior managers in working with their emotions and handling crises more effectively (Collins *et al.*, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, this study extends cognitive theory by examining how senior managers use metaphors when relating to the reality of crises because metaphors make language richer, more felicitous and imply something more conceptually profound (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2005). Metaphors influence how people construct the world and create social realities (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). A discourse dynamics approach to metaphor analysis is used to reframe leadership as a cognitive map of emotions experienced during a crisis. It provides a window into the social thoughts and attitudes (Landau *et al.*, 2010) during a social crisis, which tends to happen more and more frequently in this complex and uncertain world. Furthermore, the literature also shows little understanding of how senior managers use metaphors to express their feelings and actions when going through crises. It becomes even more imperative to study during times of turbulence, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, the Israel and Hamas conflict, and various social movements across the globe.

As a result, this study sheds new insights into the issue of managerial psychology in a crisis by investigating different ways of cognitively appraising their emotions (i.e., metaphors) during critical moments. It reiterates the methodological path of metaphor as a central component of human cognition (Cornelissen, 2005) and social cognition (Landau *et al.*, 2010).

Theoretical background

Crisis management literature

Crises are nothing new to the managerial psychology literature. Sayegh *et al.* (2004) highlight six major characteristics of an organisational crisis: (1) high ambiguity with unknown causes

and effects; (2) low probability of happening; (3) an unusual and sudden event; (4) rapid responses needed; (5) a serious threat to the survival of the organisation and its stakeholders; and (6) a dilemma in decision making. However, crises are never the same for managers due to the above characteristics, especially in our volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world of pandemics, wars and social movements. Organisational crises come in different shapes and sizes.

Crisis management refers to a leadership process around times of crisis, including times immediately before, during and after the acute consequences of the crisis (Wu *et al.*, 2021). The literature on crisis management has blossomed recently due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the role of managers is crucial. For example, Wu *et al.* (2021) reviewed 168 crisis management studies in top-tier journals over five decades (1970–2020). They found that a large cluster focuses on a variety of theoretical perspectives to advance managers' cognitive processing and decision-making during crises, namely their sensemaking, problem sensing and decision-making, and their appraisal of crisis as a threat or opportunity. However, they also found that managers' emotions are overlooked, particularly the emotion management process through which negative emotions can be mitigated, and the positive emotions of stakeholders can be restored.

A more recent "interdisciplinary" review of 69 studies in prestigious journals between 1998 and 2021 was conducted by Collins *et al.* (2023). It is unclear what they mean by "interdisciplinary review" and why that particular period was selected. However, they identify four themes and use different metaphors to refer to the role of managers during crisis: (1) leaders as shepherds (i.e., those who protect and guide through external-unintentional crises); (2) leaders as saints (i.e., those who provide a beacon through external-intentional crises); (3) leaders as spokespersons (i.e., those who apologise after internal-unintentional crises); and (4) leaders as sinners (i.e., atone for internal-intentional crises). Collins *et al.* (2023) also confirm that their review "sheds little light on how managers self-regulate their own emotions during a crisis" (p. 17).

The above two most recent systematic review studies aggregate 205 top-tier studies on crisis management over the past 51 years. They clearly show a big gap in knowledge of crisis management, specifically how managers regulate their emotions during a crisis. This study aims to address this missing piece in the literature on crisis management.

Cognitive appraisal theory and work psychology

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) first introduced cognitive appraisal theory to explain that a dynamic interaction between a person and his/her environment may cause stress and lead to various outcomes. In other words, when individuals encounter a stressful situation, they engage in cognitive appraisal, evaluating the situation based on their resources and experiences. Depending on their assessment, they may perceive it as either threatening or challenging. This primary appraisal process, as outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), elucidates why some people excel in stressful situations while others falter. Subsequently, individuals employ coping mechanisms, referred to as secondary appraisal, to deal with the situation. This process entails interpreting stressful events or crises differently, with those perceiving them as challenging more likely to enhance their performance and outcomes (Majeed and Naseer, 2021).

Lazarus (1991) delves into emotions as a cognitive system, proposing that emotions serve as mental maps reflecting certain truths *about* the world, thus making them cognitive. He defines cognitive appraisal as "an evaluation of the significance of what is happening in the world for personal wellbeing" (Lazarus, 1991, pp. 89). Building on a cost-and-benefit analysis framework (Goody *et al.*, 2010), Lazarus asserts that emotions are linked to varied assessments of emotional responses to events, individuals, or situations. Cognitive appraisal theory not only explains how constraints can transform into passions leading to innovative

actions (López *et al.*, 2022) but also elucidates the role of secure attachment in enabling constructive coping with adverse conditions (Jiang, 2017). Furthermore, it rationalises how diverse cognitive processes, such as rumination and problem-solving, can result in different behaviours, such as openness or resistance to knowledge sharing (Madrid *et al.*, 2015).

However, the understanding of how cognitive appraisal theory contributes to crisis management remains limited. In their critical systematic reviews, both Collins *et al.* (2023) and Wu *et al.* (2021) highlighted the utilisation of various theoretical perspectives on cognitive processing over the last half-century, such as sensemaking theory, sensegiving theory, attribution theory, decision-making models, and situational crisis communication theory. Yet, cognitive appraisal theory seems largely overlooked in crisis management studies; possibly because the literature has largely ignored the emotions of managers in crisis. Moreover, most cognitive appraisal studies employ traditional quantitative methods to test their hypotheses derived from cognitive appraisal theory (e.g., López *et al.*, 2022; Majeed and Naseer, 2021). It is time for managerial psychological scholars to look for greater in-depth exploration (Wilhelmy and Köhler, 2021) and innovative qualitative research methods to elaborate on the theory (Fisher and Aguinis, 2017). This study departs from the traditional qualitative approach and adopts metaphor analysis to explore cognitive appraisal theory differently.

Research context

Between 2015 and 2018, South African universities experienced violent student protests in the #FeesMustFall movement (Habid, 2019). A decline in university subsidies and an increase in youth unemployment for decades led to cumulative levels of frustration among students in South Africa (Ray, 2016). Students rebelling against rising tuition fees and demanding fee-free higher education eventually turned university campuses into violent “battlefields” (Booyesen, 2016). The movement, initially sparked by proposed fee increases announced towards the end of October 2015, evolved into a nationwide call for free education, leading to one of the largest student protest movements since apartheid. Although the call for free education for the poor was widely supported, the violence, destruction of property, and boycotting of academic activities generated mixed responses. University senior managers were steering their universities through the turbulence of violent protests and then had to respond to the unplanned radical change imposed by the government. The relevance of this study extends beyond the South African context. Protests about the high cost of higher education are increasingly found across the globe (Malenya, 2016). The #FeesMustFall protests are critical not only for their impact on higher education, but also for the broader conversations they sparked about inequality, youth activism, and political change (O’Brien *et al.*, 2018).

Research methods

Metaphor analysis

Human understanding often relies on metaphors, allowing people to comprehend abstract concepts through more concrete ones (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Conceptual metaphors form a unique cognitive mechanism to shape social thoughts and attitudes (Landau *et al.*, 2010). Metaphors operate as conceptual mappings between *source* and *target concepts* (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Source concepts refer to what is familiar to people, while target concepts refer to relatively more abstract referents, which are more difficult to grasp. Conceptual mappings involve systems of mental associations between corresponding elements (e.g., the referents of the concepts, the attributes of these referents or relational knowledge common to the structure of both concepts) of the concepts in metaphoric relation called entailments

(Landau *et al.*, 2010). There are various approaches to metaphor analysis (Cornelissen, 2005). This study adapts the discourse dynamics approach to metaphor analysis (Cameron *et al.*, 2009) to fit the research purpose as explained previously.

Data collection

A purposive sampling technique was used (Taherdoost, 2016) to gain the most comprehensive picture possible. Invitations were sent to all 26 public universities in South Africa. Thirty-seven senior managers (10 women and 27 men) from 16 public universities across seven of the nine provinces in South Africa voluntarily participated in this study. Twenty-two were from traditional universities, eight from comprehensive universities and seven from technology universities. The total length of all interviews was 1,555 minutes, recorded and transcribed for the final analysis. Semi-structured open-ended questions were used to enable the richness of the data (Rapley, 2001). The questions focused on emotions and thoughts during the student protests and the introduction and implementation of free higher education for poor students. Participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of those experiences.

Discourse dynamics approach to metaphor analysis

The discourse dynamics approach to metaphor analysis developed by Cameron *et al.* (2009) includes metaphor identification, metaphor coding, and pattern finding with coded data. We extend this approach further by adding concept mapping after pattern finding to develop a conceptual framework to advance the theory. Both authors analyse the data separately and then integrate their findings to make sense of the final conceptual framework.

The first step is metaphor identification. It is not an independent, linear process but a recursive series of hermeneutic steps (Schmitt, 2005). The discourse dynamics method of metaphor analysis continually moves across levels and timescales of the period involved. Cameron (2008) states that the source area of the metaphor evokes multiple possibilities, influenced by participants' social-cultural contexts and experiences. Based on the transcribed text, around 100 metaphors have been identified.

The second step is metaphor coding. In the cognitive metaphor theory, vehicle terms are referred to as source domain terms (Cameron *et al.*, 2009). The vehicle is the figure of speech itself. The subject of the metaphor is called the tenor. The vehicle term embodies the tenor and the comparison of the vehicle with the tenor results in the meaning of the metaphor. Vehicle terms or phrases can often be recognised as incongruent or anomalous phrases in the narrative. The study of metaphors through a discourse dynamics approach emphasises the evolving discourse context - the metaphor cannot be understood without considering how it works in the flow of the text.

The third step is to identify the source domain, tenor, and topic domain. Metaphor analysis detangles the intricate web of thoughts through the discourse dynamics of a metaphor and by interpreting the use of the metaphor in the context of the discourse activity.

The fourth step is to construct elicitation associated with each metaphor to express the participant's underlying meaning about the source domain (Schmitt, 2005). There is a clear transfer of meaning between the vehicle and the tenor within the topic domain, and construct elicitation brings this meaning forward. The constructs that captured the participants' overall thinking about the underlying meaning of the metaphor are identified, and verbal labels are assigned to each construct (*Due to the word limit, quotations will be provided upon request*).

The last step is concept mapping (Novak, 2009), which creates frames based on the metaphor analysis to show systematic relationships among stakeholders through emotions expressed by senior managers in this study. The tenors, the meaning constructs, and the

original vehicle terms of the metaphors are indicated on the same map for each domain. The tenors are indicated on the left-hand side. The meaning constructs are indicated with circles, while the original vehicle terms of the metaphors are indicated on the right with a rounded rectangle of all figures. In this way, metaphors become an effective frame as they allow the use of a known object with specific characteristics to express feelings and lived experiences so that the metaphors enhance the understanding of the message.

The following topic domains were identified: (i) *looming crisis*, (ii) *crisis onset*, (iii) *crisis triage and containment*; (iv) *(not) taking action*; and (v) *post-crisis reflection*. These domains line up most closely with Seeger *et al.* (2003)’s temporal model crisis phases, i.e. pre-crisis conditions, crisis onset, triage and containment, repair and reconciliation, and post-crisis, and are subsequently mapped in the discussion of cognitive appraisal.

Findings

Looming crisis

The metaphor analysis portrays signs of a looming crisis that preceded the announcement of free higher education. Figure 1 illustrates a concept map where senior managers saw the early signs from their students, the government, and its president’s announcement, which was seen as intentional harm and caused destruction. The overall disappointment with the government and mistrust in national leadership were widely expressed through the use of metaphors such as “bitter taste” or “a fish rots from its head”.

It was also known for quite some time in South Africa that tuition fee increases were high and state subsidy was decreasing (du Plessis and Bui, 2023). What was unexpected was the magnitude with which the protest action erupted. The protest actions were described as a “wave” that swept over universities and forced a country president to “surrender”. It is not surprising that metaphors are seen as the currency of the emotional mind (Modell, 2009). Applying cognitive appraisal theory, the primary appraisal is that of disappointment, unpleasantness, and worry when early signs of a double crisis appear.

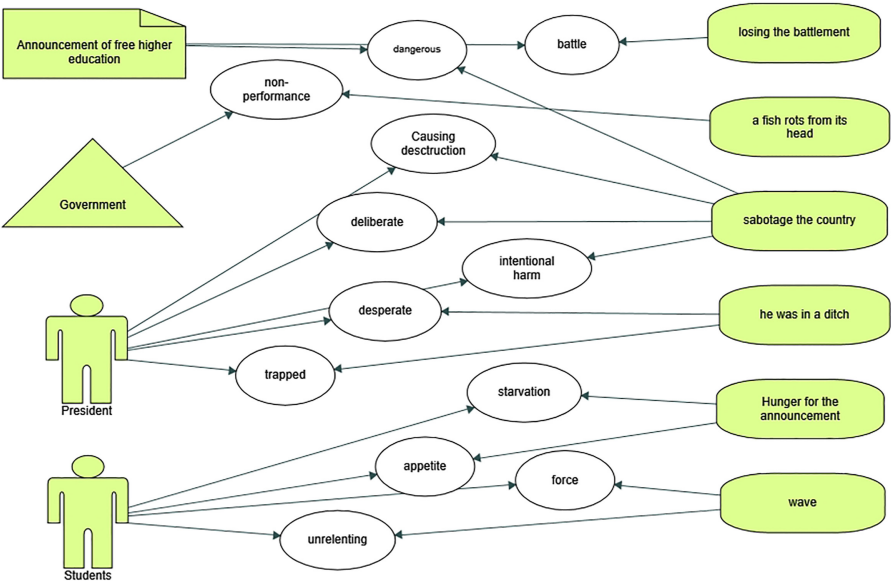


Figure 1.
Looming crisis

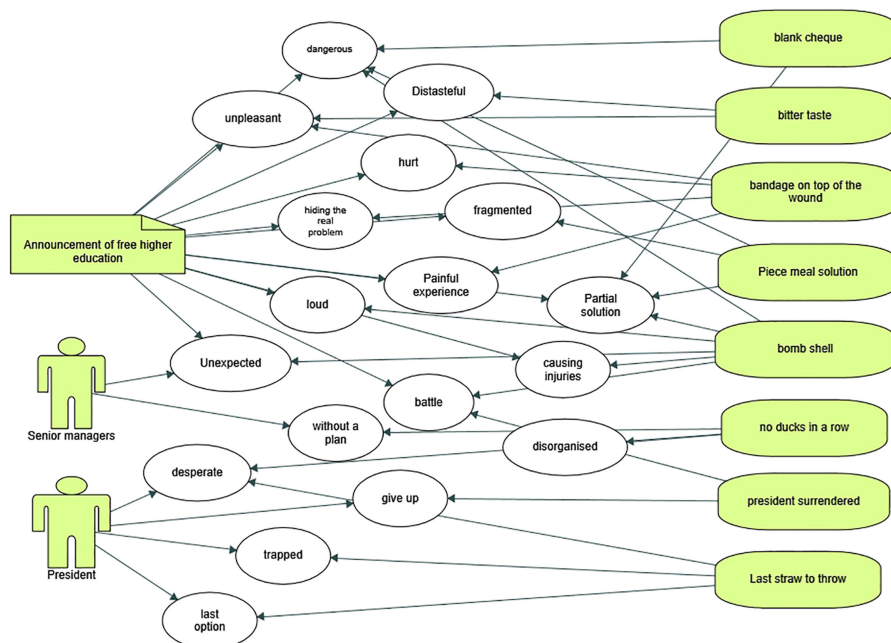
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Crisis onset

Figure 2 illustrates the concept map of how senior managers recognised crises via metaphors they indicated themselves, following the South African president's announcement of free higher education. The cognitive appraisal process described above takes place together with an emotional experience. Taking all these responses into account is of utmost importance as these responses guided senior managers' actions. Although the need for change in South African higher education existed (Booyesen, 2016), the unexpected announcement of free higher education and the time it was made caused turmoil at universities and triggered another crisis (du Plessis and Bui, 2023). In the language of a senior manager, it was compared to "a bombshell".

What became clear from the metaphor analysis was the substantial ambiguity experienced by senior managers as to whether it was the best solution. Universities' senior managers were put in a situation where they had to take ownership of a decision forced upon them whilst doubtful about its long-term sustainability. The cognitive appraisal was dominated by mistrust. They felt the South African president "sabotaged" the country and only offered a "piece-meal" solution that is, in fact, a "bandage on the wound" and not solving the original factors that triggered the radical change. As a result, it left senior managers in a state of "flux", not having their "ducks in a row".

The behavioural dilemma existed when leaders had to implement a decision which was not convinced of the appropriateness of the solution. During the crisis, senior managers saw destruction and intentional harm, but little was done to stop them, "last straw to throw". In recognition of the crisis, a loss was felt, and a dangerous environment emerged. In the language of cognitive appraisal theorists, psychological losses were enormous in this crisis with painful experiences, injuries, hurt, disappointment, etc. The crisis onset reflects the



Source(s): Created by authors

Figure 2.
Crisis onset

scope of the crisis and the inadequate preparation and anxiousness of leadership (du Plessis and Bui, 2023). It also reflects the conflict and varied expectations amongst different societal stakeholders (Habid, 2019). The protest showed that students no longer trusted the legitimacy of judgements about charging tuition fees and universities serving the public good. Students’ disillusionment regarding employment led to challenging the supposed system to ensure a better future and an equal society.

Triage and containment

Figure 3 illustrates the views of senior managers on their universities in these double crises via metaphors. They described their institution as either a “jail” or a “battlefield” - a dangerous space and an environment where there were “enemies” and a “bitter taste”. The above metaphorical associations sharply contrast with the traditional notion of universities rooted in history: traditions, symbols, and cultural values that prevail at universities (Lepsius, 2017). University autonomy is built on the rationality criteria that the search for truth depends more on the exegesis of texts than scientific discovery (Pollock, 2009).

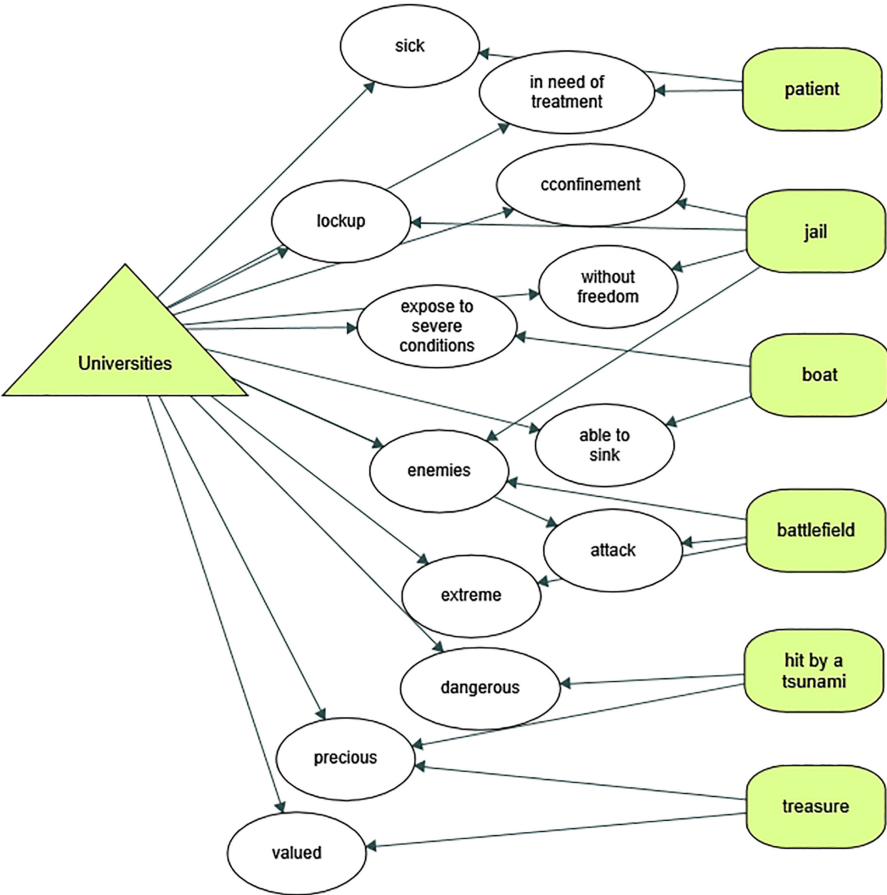


Figure 3.
Crisis triage and
containment

Source(s): Created by authors

Universities suddenly found themselves in an environment where scientific discovery gave way to unexpected political battles (du Plessis and Bui, 2023), and universities were hit by “a tsunami” or “state of flux”, emphasising once again the “force” and “extreme conditions” under which senior managers had to function like “climb onto the bandwagon”.

The value of universities as knowledge institutions is expressed by comparing them to a “treasure”. At the same time, the risk of losing institutional legitimacy is expressed, and a university is described as a “patient” in “need of treatment” and a “boat” or a “ship” that is exposed to “open sea” or “the ocean” and can “sink” at any time. The references to a patient, illness, hospital, rough water, and boats on the open sea imply at least three potential detrimental scenarios for South African universities: (a) they ran the risk of losing institutional legitimacy; (b) they might lose good academics; and (c) they might not be financially sustainable.

The crisis triage and containment indicate the magnitude and impact of the event on senior managers. It shocked the HE system and tore human emotions. As Lepsius (2017) states, the overarching focus at universities is based on science, and as such, science symbolises methodological conventions in solving problems and finding solutions. The normal order of negotiated outcomes in a structured manner could not take place. The inability to have meaningful negotiations resulted in crisis negotiations that were associated with emotional exhaustion and high stress levels. The stress associated with decision-making was more than one would expect from steering a change process. The volatility of the situation, senior managers’ unpreparedness to deal with this situation, and the potential risks associated with the violent student protests contributed to the heightened levels of stress. The volatile nature of the (unplanned) radical change (i.e., the sudden announcement of free higher education) made it difficult for university managers to focus on the core business. Instability hampered attempts at sensemaking and sense-giving during the radical change (Treffers *et al.*, 2020).

(Not)taking action

A concept map illustrating actions that senior managers chose to take (or not) when the institution was in crisis is captured in Figure 4. There seem to be more negative attitudes than positive ones. For example, some managers were perceived as “hiding” and “crumbling” under pressure. During that time, their responses also had to be “permeable” in dealing with problems and “absorb the punches” - the criticism.

The instability on a national level forced universities to adopt roles and responsibilities that were not part of their mandate under normal circumstances. In this regard, senior managers were “close to the fire”, signalling both the seriousness of the situation as well as the fact that national agendas were now being put on the table of universities’ senior managers. They seemed to be stuck in a dilemma when they described themselves as “chess pieces” that are manipulated.

When they could not operate as usual, they came under scrutiny. Ideological contestations drove the call for free higher education, whilst university management had to respond with rational arguments to explain the financial crisis and motivate academic business continuation. The metaphor “trapped between a rock and a hard place” refers to the struggle to reconcile the two institutional environments (that of a university and the national police force) representing different ideological values. This ideological dilemma of bringing police and security onto university campuses associated with openness, academic freedom, and robust debates was further complicated because students claimed to fight a noble course yet had a propensity to violence (du Plessis and Bui, 2023). In certain cases, senior managers’ silence resulted in voiceless leadership, which led to senior managers being perceived as having an “ostrich” mentality.

The findings clearly show how the cognitive appraisal of a situation is inevitably framed with the broader institutionalised environment. Different metaphors, such as “sponge” or “in

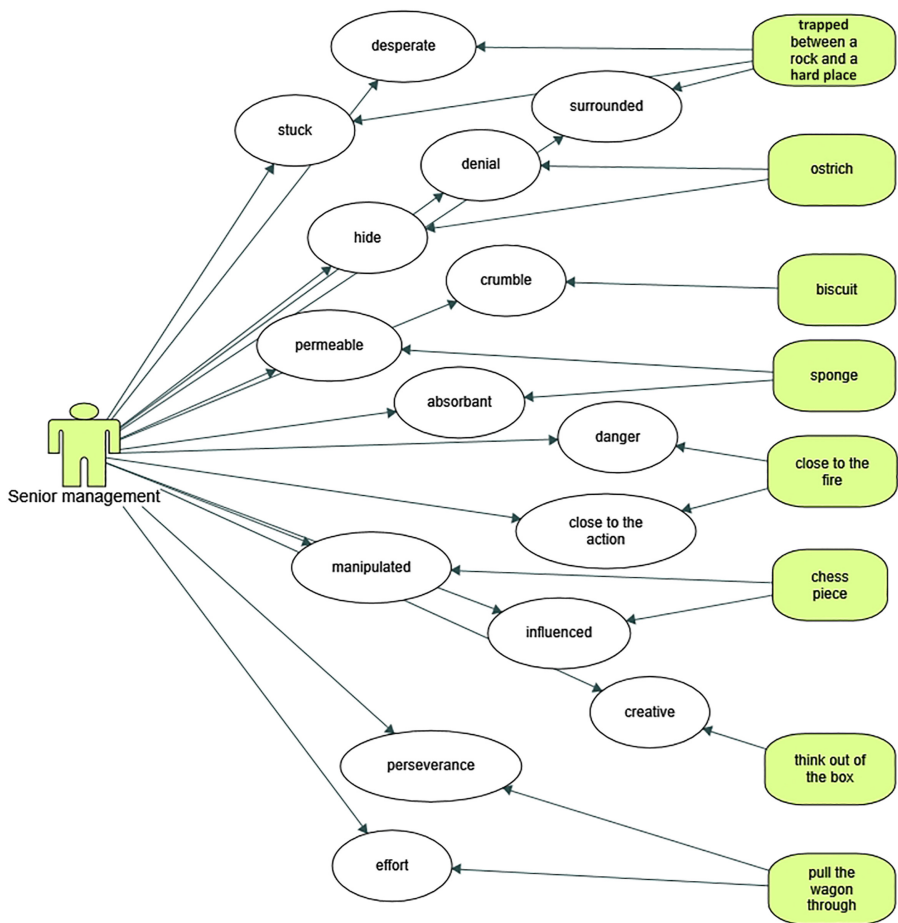


Figure 4.
(Not) Taking action

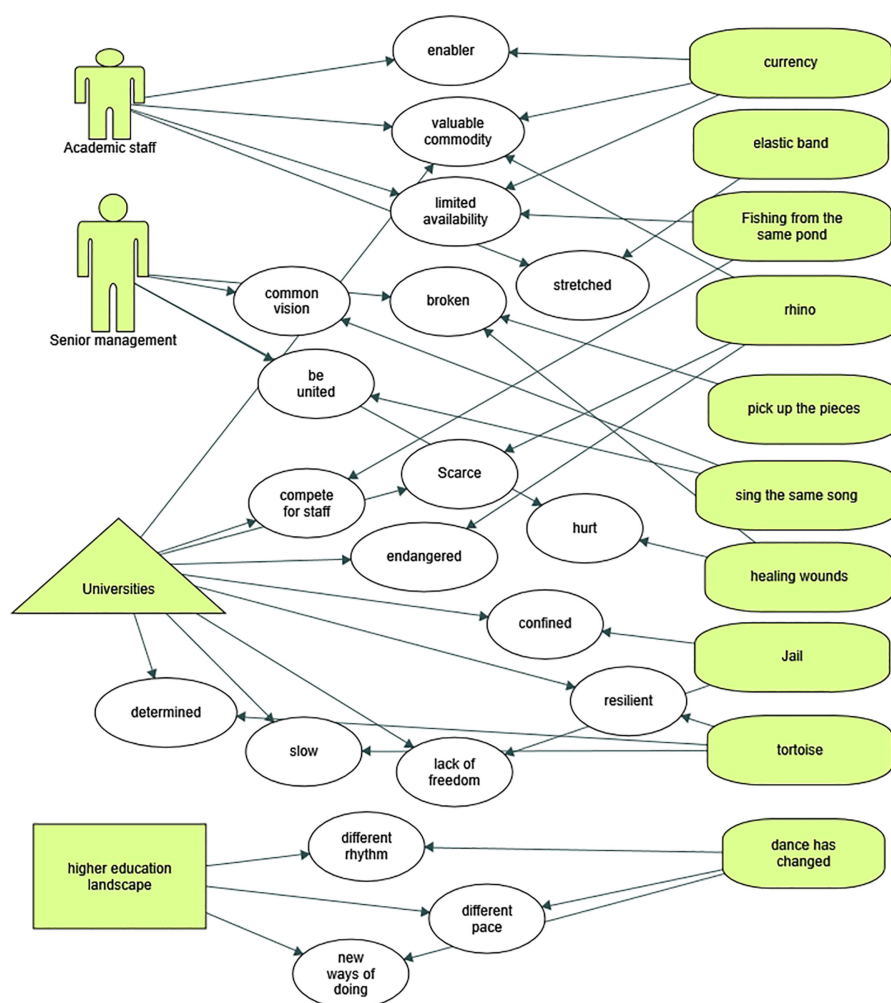
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the same boat” underscore the fact that senior managers were acting outside the normal framework associated with stable leadership.

Still, some positive framings were also found when senior managers could deal with complex issues by thinking “*out of the box*” and confidence is expressed that they would “*pull the wagon through*”, signifying perseverance and effort. The light of cognitive appraisal theory explains well that when the situation becomes limbo for many, it can be an opportunity for others to take action (Lazarus, 1991).

Post-crisis reflection

When reflecting on the crisis, senior managers seem to learn substantially from and for their management. Figure 5 illustrates the concept map of how senior managers reflect on their staff, themselves and their institutions. They perceived academic staff as the “*currency*” of a university, a valuable commodity, but also acknowledged how much staff were stretched out. They also perceived a vicious circle of stagnation in the system. Senior managers across the



Source(s): Created by authors

Figure 5.
Post-crisis reflection

sector face similar issues, like “*sing the same song*”. The current status of universities was equated with an endangered “*rhino*” to “*poached their horns* all the time”. The risk of staff members leaving universities to join other institutions is recognised as public universities are “*fishing from the same pond*” and referring to the limited pool of academics.

The impact of the crisis tends to be determined in the long run, but the South African HE landscape seems to have changed in many ways when “*they are not in that boat anymore*” and “*the dance has changed*”.

The post-crisis reflection reports the immediate operational and longer-term consequences the crisis would have on the institution. Senior managers seem to have recognised the risk of losing staff. A lack of operational procedures complicated administrative university processes. Crisis negotiations led to decisions being made under pressure without realising or contemplating the full consequences of implementing these decisions. As a result, staff had

to work late hours, quickly develop policies and fast-track the implementation of certain decisions to keep universities functioning. Amidst these changes, staff felt uninformed, unprepared, traumatised, and demotivated. The impact of the (unplanned) radical change led from one crisis to another. Some changes require new operational procedures, while others have long-term implications and require new strategic plans that refocus on institutional priorities. Several participants acknowledged the reality of long-term implications is yet to be explored. New needs still emerged and could not necessarily be predicted.

The crisis forced senior managers to think differently about how the universities should operate. For example, this study shows that the #FeesMustFall movement was the perfect “storm” in the teaching environment to promote hybrid learning to dramatically change higher education in South Africa long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion and conclusion

A crisis is not a pleasant state to experience, but it has become unavoidable in our complex and uncertain world (Collins *et al.*, 2023). Using metaphors to verbalise the cognitive appraisal process has shed new light on how South African higher education senior managers experienced the #FeesMustFall crisis. The focus is on how they gave meaning to such experiences through metaphors that enabled them to comprehend, understand, extrapolate and structure the unknown (Combe and Carrington, 2015). Their metaphors to describe crisis and change that might not be easy to put in words to express their thinking were identified through a discourse dynamics approach. Metaphors do not only transfer meaning between different domains but also can transform meaning through their different emerged layers (Modell, 2009).

The discourse dynamics approach to metaphor analysis shapes their narratives and indicates how they experienced emotionally and intellectually and adapted to the crisis. The value of this metaphor analysis approach to analyse the temporal progression of senior managers’ cognitive appraisal lies in the fact that it provides a window into people’s social thoughts and attitudes (Landau *et al.*, 2010). In this way, it helps to uncover the deeper levels of embodiment, i.e., involving the body in the process of sensemaking, which can be felt, moved or examined from different angles for better sensemaking (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006). Through cognitive appraisal, emotions of hurt and disillusionment came to the surface, and senior managers experienced a crisis created externally but impacting their operations and emotions directly. The findings of this study are relevant to other externally generated crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic the world is experiencing, and indicate several important implications, in theory and in practice.

Theoretical implications

Senior managers’ emotions are critical to organisations because of the consequences resulting from their decisions (Treffers *et al.*, 2020). This study has observed mainly negative emotions expressed via metaphors, such as disappointment (“a fish rots from its head”), frustration (“sabotage the country”), loss (“lost the battlement”), pain (“bandage on top of the wound”), stress (“elastic band”), desperation (“hit by a tsunami”, “bombshell”), even giving up (“trapped between a rock and a hard place”, “the last straw to throw”). These, according to Lazarus (1991), can be seen as their personal and their organisational losses.

Among the mess of losses, there were positive emotions when senior managers showed their perseverance (“pull the wagon”), resilience (“gather oneself”), appreciation (“treasure”), creativity (“think outside the box”, “dance has changed”), and courage (“stand up for others”). According to cognitive appraisal theorists, these are seen as their gains (Majeed and Naseer, 2021). Psychologically, in crises, the gains (e.g., resilience and perseverance) are achieved

through losses (e.g., disappointment and frustration). In other words, through the lens of cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), many senior managers and possibly their subordinates can become more resilient to crises if they consciously reflect on and appraise their cognitive emotions. This study also lends support to the emerging paradoxical leader behaviour theory (Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021), i.e., seemingly competing but interrelated behaviours to adapt to situations or/and demands simultaneously and over time (Ishaq *et al.*, 2021) to understand ambiguity-centred leadership better (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011).

Also, about crisis management, Tourish and Hargie (2012) explore the root metaphors senior managers employed as they sought to explain a crisis in the banking sector to diminish their responsibility for what happened. However, our study explores how senior managers use metaphors to express their emotions during a crisis. It advances the managerial psychology literature by adding actual emotions and feelings that senior managers face during crises (Collins *et al.*, 2023). The cognitive appraisal theory constitutes a valuable theoretical framework for the comprehension of the emotions of managers during a crisis. This study serves to exemplify the manner in which emotional responses, as conveyed through metaphoric expressions, are intricately influenced by cognitive appraisal processes. By shedding light on this dynamic, it significantly contributes to our comprehension of the emotional experiences and reactions of managers during times of crisis. In the looming crisis phase, prevailing emotions were characterised by a sense of disappointment and mistrust, while senior managers grappled with a profound psychological sense of losing control and legitimacy (du Plessis and Bui, 2023). This emotional milieu was further compounded by heightened levels of anxiety, exacerbated by the realisation that the crisis had fundamentally transformed the nature of universities as autonomous institutions. The research findings underscore the formidable challenge faced by senior managers in maintaining a steadfast commitment to the core mission of their institutions while simultaneously contending with a crisis rooted in issues of social inequality and the activism of youth.

The framework of crisis adaptation is captured in the five domains that were identified and integrated with the work of Seeger *et al.* (2003): looming crisis → crisis onset → crisis triage and containment → (not) taking action → post-crisis reflection. It contributes to a better understanding of the dynamic shifts in the emotional states of senior managers across the various phases outlined in the temporal model (Seeger *et al.*, 2003). This framework of crisis adaptation indicates that deep down into the emotions and feelings through critical crises, senior managers still try to act rationally by observing early signs of a crisis, making sense of things happening and impacting their job, taking actions accordingly, and reflecting on the whole crisis to draw lessons for themselves. They gain through their losses from experiencing negative emotions during the crisis by reflecting and appraising their emotions (Lazarus, 1991). This study has enhanced the research conversation of emotions associated with different assessments responding to an event, person, or situation (Gooty *et al.*, 2010) and crises. It reflects the psychological learning of senior managers via their emotional cognition during crises. It develops a model of psychological crisis adaptation and resilience. It expands the conversation of turning crises into opportunities (Yang and Huang, 2021) in both business operations and psychology. It elucidates how the stress generated by a crisis ultimately transforms into resilience and fosters innovative responses (Majeed and Naseer, 2021).

Managerial implications

The South African #FeesMustFall social movement and its crises are a useful case for practitioners and organisations to learn (du Plessis and Bui, 2023). First, this study suggests that managers will get great benefits from a crisis if they cognitively appraise the situation and see the crisis as a challenge to tackle rather than a threat to outperform in such stressful situations (Majeed and Naseer, 2021).

Second, organisations should pay more attention to understanding managers' emotions during a crisis (Collins *et al.*, 2023) in their leadership and professional development programmes. Such development will help to reduce the losses and the damaging effects resulting from inappropriate decision-making when managers are in negative emotional states.

Third, organisations can use the crisis's resilience and adaptation model to develop their managers in adapting to crises or unplanned radical changes resulting from external changes (Teo *et al.*, 2017). For example, the impact of COVID-19 and the resulting global economic crisis is already on the agenda of most sectors, including higher education (Liu *et al.*, 2022). Managers should be aware of early signs of the crisis and its potential impact on their business operation in the looming and recognition stages. Then, they analyse the situation and work collectively on possible actions to minimise losses and maximise gains. After implementing each action, they should reflect on the whole process to better adapt to future changes.

Limitations

Though this study was designed carefully to reduce all possible biases, it cannot avoid certain limitations, which can open doors for future research. First, this study focused on senior managers at public universities in South Africa only. South Africa has its own political, economic, and cultural composition. Therefore, any interpretation and generalisation should be made with caution. Secondly, post-COVID-19, senior managers have to deal with radical changes to a much higher degree than ever before (Garretsen *et al.*, 2022; Steinbach *et al.*, 2021). It might be novel for future research to investigate the topic from other stakeholders rather than just senior managers. More importantly, future crisis management research should advance cognitive appraisal theory further by exploring how to turn a crisis into something exciting psychologically for people, including managers and employees, to make the most of a crisis's challenges.

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