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Explicating the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication and crisis management research: a review of communication and business journals

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of literature concerning the social construction of crisis. This study aimed to clarify inconsistencies regarding the social constructionist perspective by examining how the key terms of social constructionism are applied in crisis communication and crisis management studies. Through an analysis of 65 scholarly works in both communication and business journals, this study proposes a four-dimensional model of social constructionist crisis research (SCCR): (1) cause – the objective facticity and subjective meaning of crisis; (2) text – a constitutive view of language; (3) meaning – multiple actors and multiple realities; and (4) context – societal context awareness. Next, three approaches to SCCR are identified: a terminological approach, a framing approach, and a complexity-based approach. Lastly, the implications of social constructionism for theory and methodology development in crisis communication are discussed.

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In the past decade, crises have been increasingly framed as social constructions that are embodied in the flux of social discourse (e.g., Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; X. Zhao, Zhan, & Jie, 2018). The emergence of social constructionism in the crisis communication research field is not due solely to the widespread influence of postmodernist thinking. Rather, it is also being fostered and facilitated by the way in which crisis communication researchers have turned to the risk communication and organizational communication literature, wherein the influence of social constructionism has been significant since the mid-1990s (cf. Beck & Ritter, 1992; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

Social constructionism is a sociological theory according to which knowledge and meaning are historically and culturally constructed through social processes and actions (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Gergen, 1985). Social constructionist perspectives on crisis communication are concerned with explicating the process by which social actors come to describe, explain, or account for the crisis (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Such social constructionist views of crisis dispute those of their modernist or rationalistic counterparts in favor of reframing through the complexity of the concept (Simonsson & Heide, 2018). Crisis research that adopts the social constructionist perspective also complements the managerial lens of crisis management by integrating more social and cultural considerations (Diers-Lawson, 2017). Given the pervasiveness and complexity of crisis discourse – the various types of crisis, the multiform media involved, the variety of voices and claims, the deeply recursive relationships between discourse, and the material aspects of crisis – it is clear that continuing to study social constructionist perspectives of crisis communication would provide more valuable and far-reaching insights into the research field.

However, the capacity of social constructionism to both build theory and generate methodological implications is somewhat undermined in crisis communication research. This is due to confusing and sometimes conflicting definitions of social constructionism, as well as to ongoing debates about the bewildering array of approaches to social constructionist crisis research. As a result, how crisis communication scholars talk about and analyze a crisis using a social constructionist lens varies considerably. Nevertheless, there has been little theoretical explication of social constructionism within public relations. What is therefore needed is greater clarity and a more in-depth elaboration of the social constructionist perspective in order to learn, explore, apply, and further build upon its components.

The aim of this study was to explicate both social constructionism and the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication and crisis management research (CCMR¹). The explication process includes conferring meaning to concepts, terms, and their operationalization, as well as providing linkages between them (Chaffee, 1991). Therefore, the first section of this work provides definitions of key terms in social constructionism, in addition to outlining four core premises of the perspective. Then, a thematic analysis is conducted and applied to the four core premises as they are proposed in social constructionist crisis research (SCCR). These core premises are further developed into a four-dimensional model onto which the current study could plot SCCR. Additionally, the terminological approach, framing approach, and complexity-based approach in SCCR are distinguished by taking into consideration their divergent theoretical bases and methodological choices. The results are next used to critique the current social constructionist view of crisis. The findings also advance crisis communication theory, as the implications of social constructionism for theory and methodology are discussed.

To wit, the field of crisis communication lacks a theoretically informed examination and conceptualization of social constructionism, one that can inform empirical study and chart future research directions. Therefore, the findings from this study aim to fill this critical gap by proposing a four-dimensional model for SCCR that can explain otherwise confusing concepts as well as their applications, clearly distinguishing relevant streams of work to extend the explanatory power of social constructionism, and thereafter suggesting some theoretical and methodological implications.

Literature review

Social constructionism: key terms and core premises

Given the interest in social constructionist theorizing of crisis, some background to and core premises of social constructionism are necessary. American sociologist Peter Berger introduced the term *social construction* to sociology, but social construction has its roots in American pragmatism (e.g., Pierce, Dewey, and James), symbolic interaction (e.g., Mead), and phenomenology (e.g., Schultz). More recently, *social constructionism* has been treated as a very broad and multifaceted concept, as it has been aligned with postmodernism, critical theory, and hermeneutics (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Building on Berger's book (coauthored with Thomas Luckmann), *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), the underlying assumption of social constructionism is that people jointly construct their understandings of the world through language.

Social constructionism has been contrasted to, compared to, and seen as an alternative to positivism. As an epistemology, social constructionism concerns the constitutive role of language (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). As an ontology, social constructionism emphasizes the socially created nature of social life (Burr, 2015). According to Czarniawska (2003), the term *construction* denotes both the process and its result. In this sense, one way of understanding social construction is as a process in which people's experience of reality is determined by the meanings they attach to that reality. The other way of seeing social construction is as a social product, one that is constructed as an outcome of interactions between complex and diverse forces. Through the lens of social constructionism, the present study defined crisis as a socially constructed concept: a process and a product of collective meaning-making and ongoing negotiation through complex interactions among multiple social actors

in a particular social setting. Social constructionist perspectives represent a cluster of shared conceptualizations of crisis, crisis communication, and crisis management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). They are concerned with explicating the process by which social actors come to describe, explain, or account for a crisis (Gergen, 1985).

Foundational studies conceptualized social constructionism via the four core premises detailed in the current work: (1) the dual character of society – social constructionism portrays the world as made or invented, rather than being merely given or taken for granted. The dual character of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), both objective facticity and subjective meaning, cannot be understood through observation because our senses are inherently prejudiced; (2) the constitutive role of language – social constructionism recognizes the fundamental role of language and communication. In this view, language is not so much a vehicle to understand the world around us as it is a tool to construct reality (Burr, 2015); (3) the multiplicity of meanings – social constructionism emphasizes that multiple realities are produced from interactions among multiple social actors (Hacking, 1999). Meanings are produced and reproduced, while multiple realities compete for truth and legitimacy (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010); (4) the societal contexts of construction – social constructionism describes the terms by which we understand the world as socially, historically, and culturally situated; once in place, they both enable and constrain meanings and actions. Therefore, multiple meanings and realities are constructed through negotiated social processes and interactions.

Social constructionist communication research

The term *social construction* and its variations (e.g., social construction of reality, social constructionism, social constructionist, social constructivism, and social constructivist) have diffused across a diverse array of social science disciplines and fields in the twenty-first century. These variations are widely used in psychology (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985), anthropology (e.g., Amit, 2003; Smedley & Smedley, 2005), linguistics (e.g., Lakoff, 2004; Potter, 1996), and education (e.g., Steffe & Gale, 1995).

In the mid-1990s, Barnett Pearce introduced social constructionism to communication studies (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Many related disciplines consider social constructionism as a reflexive and interpretative approach to their fields of study. The current study provides a brief review of how social construction is used in some disciplines related to CCMR. The social constructionist approach in CCMR benefits from the study of the social construction of risk. As a research pursuit, the exploration of social constructions of risk has grown dramatically since Beck's (1992) influential work. The social constructionist understanding of risk has provided powerful and far-reaching insights into risks as communicative constructions (e.g., Sharf & Vanderford, 2003; Tierney, 1999).

In the 1980s, organizational communication scholars began to apply the constructionist lens for understanding the emergence of social forms by constructing organizations as symbolically constituted cultures rather than material entities. Comprehensive scholarship in organizational communication studies has investigated discursive constructions as a distinct approach in the research of communication that constitutes organization (e.g., Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). In Fairhurst and Grant's (2010) opinion, constructionist approaches to organizational and management phenomena are not only commonplace but also on the rise.

In the rhetorical and critical approach to public relations, scholars pay more attention to the meaning construction of public relations practices. The meaning approach in public relations studies uses various assumptions and principles of social constructionism (Heath, 2009). Apart from these, organizational and business communication scholars have joined with public relations scholars to adopt the social constructionist agenda for corporate social responsibility studies (e.g., Dhanesh, 2015; Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013). In these studies, researchers regard corporate social responsibility as communicatively constructed in a dynamic interaction process. Although their underlying dynamics vary in different disciplines, a common theme unites these studies: the social constructionist perspective emphasizes the central role communication plays in constructing the social world, as well as how the social world is understood.

The limitations of current crisis literature and the value of social constructionism

The limitations of crisis communication theory have been discussed in recent years. Previous scholars have identified four major limitations of the current crisis literature. First, crises are “deliberately oversimplified” into de-contextualized types and modes (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 13) that prevent the practical application of crisis research (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Lehmborg & Hicks, 2018). Traditional CCMR views a crisis as an objective and “real” thing that exists “out there” and affects an organization. This understanding of crisis is based in a positivist epistemology and entails the need to discover the nature and characteristics of crisis as a “real thing.” Crises are in this sense understood in de-contextualized ways. For example, some crisis scholars have provided crisis typologies (e.g., McCown, 1997; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003) and developed cyclical crisis models (cf. Fink, 1987) to evaluate a crisis.

Second, a focus on the repertoires and effectiveness of crisis response relegates communication to a simple input or output status (Fairhurst, 2007; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Traditional CCMR considers language a symbolic resource (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995). Language, in this sense, is considered to have inherent meaning and the capacity to produce rational and desirable outcomes. Accordingly, language is viewed as a tool, one that can be used to develop appropriate crisis response strategies that lead to the resolution of a crisis.

Third, the organization-centric research agenda ignores the fact that crises have broad implications for a variety of stakeholders (Heath & Coombs, 2006; Kent & Boatwright, 2018). Existing CCMR is dominated by such an organization-centric approach (Kent, 2010). For one thing, the research focuses on organizational information, i.e., what kinds of crisis information need be disseminated to “the audience” when a crisis occurs. For another, it prioritizes the repertoires and effectiveness of crisis response strategies, such as the crisis response repertoires summarized by Benoit (2015). In this way, the literature holds passive views toward multiple social actors, who are themselves collectively considered a passive audience who can only receive and respond to the crisis information distributed to them by organizations (Lee, 2009).

Fourth, most CCMR externalizes and objectifies organizations as separate domains in society. The contextual awareness of mainstream CCMR imposes constraints at both a crisis- and organization-level. Typically, CCMR focuses on crisis-level impacts on contexts (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Wu, Huang, & Kao, 2016), i.e., crisis type, crisis stakeholder, crisis stage, and crisis system. Some scholars, however, have extended the understanding of contexts to an organizational level. These scholars have explored how organizational contexts influence the selection of crisis response strategies (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Massey, 2001) as well as how a crisis influences the organizational context (e.g., Pang, Cropp, & Cameron, 2006; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Though fruitful, such research has been relatively inattentive to contextual factors beyond organizations. This disjunction between organizations and society obscures important factors (e.g., political, economic, and cultural factors) that contribute to the evolution of a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; H. Zhao, Falkheimer, & Heide, 2017).

Social constructionism provides valuable insights that can help address the four major limitations just described. With a greater focus on dynamics, multiplicity, and complexity, SCCR first disputes the modernist and rationalistic view of a crisis: First, the social constructionist perspective does not question the existence of triggering events “out there,” but instead emphasizes the relations of people to them – what triggering events mean to different people (Simonsson & Heide, 2018; H. Zhao et al., 2017). Second, social constructionism embraces post-structuralist thinking about language, emphasizing its unstable and contextualized features (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Hence, SCCR contends that crisis communication is more than just a simple transmission of crisis information; it is also a medium for the negotiation and construction of meaning (e.g., X. Zhao et al., 2018). Third, SCCR underscores social actors’ roles in constructing crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Emphasis is placed on the socially constructed nature of a crisis, as both a process and an outcome of interactions among social actors. Fourth, the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication not only contributes to conceptualizing a crisis as socially constructed but also highlights the historical and cultural location of

crisis construction (e.g., Schultz & Raupp, 2010). Thus, SCCR complements the managerial lens of crisis management by integrating more social and cultural perspectives.

While the exploration of the social constructionist perspective can be valuable, improved clarity regarding the meanings of both the perspective and its underlying theory is needed so that researchers can better comprehend, and thereby build upon, them. This work argues that social constructionism should facilitate theory building and empirical research in crisis communication and public relations. Accordingly, the study sought to outline what we are able to see, think, and talk about if we were to conceive of crises in terms of social construction. Toward this end, three decades of literature were examined to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are the four core premises of social constructionism (e.g., the dual character of society, the constitutive role of language, the multiplicity of meanings, and the societal contexts of construction) applied in social constructionist crisis research?

RQ2: What are the different ways of conducting social constructionist crisis research in terms of the research focus, the main theory, the research method, and the research perspective?

Method

Data collection

To address the research questions mentioned above, this study searched for peer-reviewed journal articles or books in the *Communication Sources* and *Business Source Complete* (EBSCO) databases.² *Business Source Complete* was included because it provides the most comprehensive studies in the discipline of management, wherein studies of crisis management are most likely to appear.

The publication years ranged from 1987 to 2019, as Fink's seminal work (1987) detailed the emerging field of crisis communication. The keyword-screening method was applied in these two databases, and the keywords "social construction," "social constructionist," "socially constructed," "social construct," and "crisis" or "crises" in publication titles, abstracts, keywords, and text were selected for possible inclusion. Then, the definition of crisis communication (Coombs, 2010) and crisis management (Bundy et al., 2017) was used to identify and categorize a set of articles for inclusion. The inclusion criteria included (1) disruptive and unexpected, but actual, events that threaten to harm organizations or their stakeholders. In other words, related studies – for example, risk management, which mainly involves assessing and addressing potential threats – were not included in the analytical sample; (2) primarily the process, especially the communication process, by which an organization deals with threats. In this case, a societal crisis – for example, a financial crisis, one which does not focus on organizational behaviors – was excluded from the sample.

By applying these two criteria, this study eliminated those publications not directly relevant to crisis communication or crisis management theory or practice. Two sets of keyword searches were performed: The initial search was conducted in February 2018 (31 items), while a revised search was conducted in April 2019, in light of suggestions from the blinded reviewers on the originally submitted manuscript (adding 34 items). The two sets of searches yielded a study sample of 65 items in communication journals (n = 37), business journals (n = 24), and books (n = 4) (Appendix A). Public relations journals served as major outlets for the SCCR research, including *Public Relations Review* (n = 8), *Journal of Communication Management* (n = 5), *Journal of Public Relations Research* (n = 4), and *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (n = 4). The sample yielded fewer articles from business journals, but the *Journal of Business Ethics* contributed six articles to the sample. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of published articles in the main source journals.

Table 1. Main communication and business journals for social constructionist crisis research.

Journals	No. of Result	Percentage (%)	
Communication	<i>Public Relations Review</i>	8	12%
	<i>Journal of Public Relations Research</i>	4	6%
	<i>Journal of Communication Management</i>	5	8%
	<i>International Journal of Strategic Communication</i>	4	6%
	<i>Public Relations Inquiry</i>	2	3%
Business	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	6	9%
	<i>Journal of Management</i>	2	3%
	<i>Business Horizons</i>	2	3%
	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	1	2%
	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	1	2%
	<i>Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management</i>	1	2%

Analytical process

This study applied thematic analysis by identifying, analyzing, and thereafter reporting patterns (themes) within the gathered data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There were two main goals of thematic analysis in the current work: first, to implement categories to clarify the core premises of social constructionism that have been employed in SCCR; second, to develop categories that could distinguish different approaches within SCCR.

Both deductive and inductive approaches of thematic analysis were performed on the sample items. Two researchers (including the author) conducted the coding work. To establish intercoder reliability, the two coders went through the coding scheme together and discussed the definitions, examples, and classification rules for their comprehensibility. The goal was to establish a common understanding of the codes. Then, the two coders independently coded 15 sample items. The coding of each item was compared consecutively, and discrepancies between the two coders were discussed. These consensus sessions consolidated a common understanding of the codes between the two coders. Sufficient reliability scores were achieved with Krippendorff's alpha, ranging from 0.71 to 1.0. The thematic analysis was conducted within the constructionist paradigm. The patterns (themes) in the data comprised constructs corresponding to the subjectivity, identity, and personal biases of the coders before, during, and after the analysis.

More specifically, a deductive approach was applied for RQ1 to investigate how social construction is defined, empirically exemplified, and further augmented in SCCR. Based on the identified four core premises of social constructionism, i.e., the dual character of society, the constitutive role of language, the multiplicity of meanings, and the societal contexts of construction, the coding scheme was developed deductively. Then, all the sample research items were reviewed for content. Only aspects that fit the matrix of analysis were extracted from the sample. The sample research items were coded for correspondence with or an exemplification of the identified categories.

With regard to RQ2, which aimed to identify different approaches in SCCR, the two coders focused on the following aspects in the sample literature: (a) the research focus – how the key elements of social constructionism are presented in the publication (e.g., text, meaning, or context); (b) the main theory – which theory or theories were applied in the publication; (c) the research method – how researchers applied social constructionism to investigate a crisis empirically; and (d) the research perspective – the ways in which crisis communication (i.e., an organizational perspective or stakeholders' perspective) was perceived. The publications were then grouped according to similarity or dissimilarity into the four aspects. The reduction process not only brought together similar observations, but also classified sample items as “belonging” to a particular group, which in turn implied a comparison between the data and other observations that did not belong to the same category. For instance, the terminological approach was distinguished from other approaches because of its different underlying theory. For the framing approach and complexity-based approach, a distinction was made based mainly on the different uses of methods and perspectives.

Four dimensions of social constructionist crisis research

The focus of this section is on presenting findings to RQ1 about how the four core premises of social constructionism (e.g., the dual character of society, the constitutive role of language, the multiplicity of meanings, and the societal contexts of construction) were applied in social constructionist crisis research. Toward this end, four dimensions (i.e., cause, text, meaning, and context) of SCCR are proposed to characterize the grammars of crisis researchers, in both crisis communication and crisis management, using a social constructionist approach. This entails a consideration of these researchers' studies along the four dimensions summarized in Figure 1. The four dimensions of SCCR are commonalities within the extant literature but are not meant to be exhaustive. Furthermore, although existing research might concentrate on one dimension or cover all dimensions simultaneously, the dimensions are not mutually exclusive. In this regard, the conceptual framework offers an appropriate way to evaluate overlaps and mergers between dimensions.

Cause – the objective facticity and subjective meaning of crisis

In SCCR, crises are constructions of failure (Greenberg & Hier, 2001) that may not have a factual basis. A crisis is socially constructed as a consequence of social perception and definition; that is, a crisis may be said to exist if it is perceived to exist. Similarly, Coombs defined a crisis by emphasizing the perceptual aspect: “If stakeholders believe an organization is in crisis, a crisis does exist, and stakeholders will react to the organization as if it is in a crisis” (2014, p. 2). Put differently, when there is a perception that an organization has committed some wrongdoing, even though it may not have, then an organizational crisis becomes real. SCCR has demonstrated that crises are caused not only by objective events, such as accidents or terrorism, but also by “false claims” or “hoaxes” (see Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012, p. 323). For example, Hooper and Fearn-Banks (2006) demonstrated how the media turned a foreseeable spring flood into a sudden elemental disaster.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) pointed to the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity and subjective meaning. SCCR suggests the concept of a *triggering event* (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Weick, 1988) in order to emphasize the coexistence of subjective and objective realities (Andrews, 2012). A triggering event is defined as “a specific event that is identifiable in time and place and traceable to specific man-made causes” (Shrivastava, 1987, p. 8). Triggering events are situations that can deteriorate when pressure increases (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981; Weick, 1988). Triggering events objectively exist in everyday life; whether they turn into crises depends on subjective constructions of reality (i.e., human perception and interpretation). Hence, a crisis is constructed in the sense that crisis communicators choose and assign terminologies or categories for certain events (Hearit & Courtright, 2003). For example, when the media label an event as, for example, “newsworthy,” they create a crisis” (Edelman, 1988). Conversely, a crisis does not exist if people do not act as though it

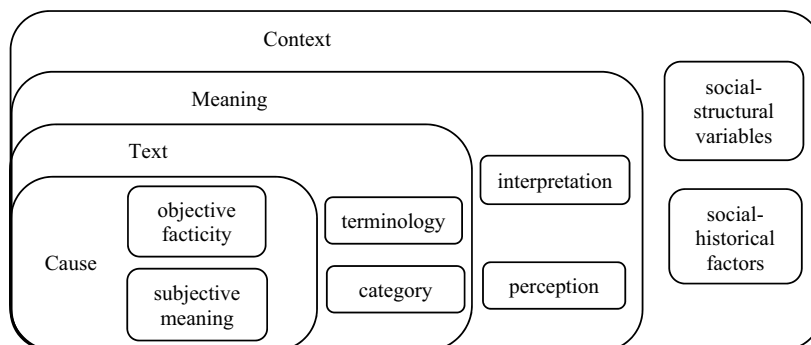


Figure 1. Four dimensions of social constructionist crisis research.

does (Carroll, 1983). There are numerous instances in which potential crisis events were neither seen as crises nor treated as crises. For example, Meyers and Rozen (2014) compared two water pollution events in the Kishon River in Israel and cancer incidence rates related to this pollution. One event was related to fishermen, while the other was related to soldiers. Although the two events shared similar characteristics and bore similar attributes, only the soldier-related event attracted media attention and thereby became a crisis – in this case, a crisis of the Israel Defense Forces.

Text – a constitutive view of language

By reexamining the cause of a crisis, SCCR highlights how the subjective interpretation and perception of triggering events are just as vital as their factual features. The second dimension in SCCR explores what *creates* the subjective reality of a crisis – language.

SCCR contends that language creates reality (Cox, 1981). Language is in this sense a vehicle for understanding and constructing the world around us (Rosenberg, 2012). Although their perspectives vary from terminological construction (e.g., Hearit & Courtright, 2003) to linguistic assignment and declaration (e.g., Hooper & Fearn-Banks, 2006) to narrative construction (e.g., Greenberg & Hier, 2001; H. Liu, 2017), SCCR agrees that language plays a prominent role in interpretations and explanations of social reality. Scholars who take a social constructionist approach have a particular interest in the two dimensions of language:

First, they are interested in the performative and action-oriented nature of language (i.e., how people actively construct accounts of interaction through language). As demonstrated in Figure 1, the focus of the second dimension is the terminology and categories that are created and communicated in times of crisis. For example, Hearit and Courtright (2003) argued that the strategic use of language contributes to the terminological control of crisis construction, which in turn leads to the symbolic resolution of a crisis. They contended that crisis response strategies, such as the discursive devices of justifications, disclaimers, attributions, and blaming, are forms of social interaction. Social actors employ language to construct particular versions of events, to excuse or validate their own behaviors, to fend off criticism, or to otherwise allow them to maintain credibility in a crisis.

Second, SCCR has drawn heavily from the post-structuralist idea that language is unstable and constantly changing, and therefore texts do not carry any stable meaning or understanding (Burr, 2015). Thus, the second dimension in SCCR highlights the complexity of the construction of crisis by clarifying that the language used in each crisis is special, contextually sensitive, and culturally bound. Several examples of this can be found in the sample literature. For example, Meyers and Rozen (2014) illustrated how the language used by the media is arbitrary and selective. Thus, to understand the contexts of language use in times of crisis, the larger socio-political world, other social surroundings, and social impacts should be considered. Furthermore, Falkheimer and Heide (2006) noted language differences among cultural ethnicities in the same political context or national state. Falkheimer (2008) further illustrated the importance of speaking the local language, because without local legitimacy, crisis communicators have no chance of influencing attitudes or behaviors in multicultural publics.

Meaning – multiple social actors and multiple realities

In the third dimension, SCCR moves to the outcomes of language creation: meaning. SCCR notes the multiplicity of meanings during a crisis, which is created by the coexistence of numerous accounts by social actors of the triggering events, and further problematizes their diversity, variability, and inconsistency (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

First, the third dimension focuses on the human agencies that create multiple meanings. For SCCR, a crisis is collectively constructed by the participation of a diverse array of actors in the social exchange, including the media, the public, organizations, and interest groups (e.g., Hearit & Courtright, 2003; Schultz & Raupp, 2010). Hence, social actors play active roles in enacting a social

reality through interaction (Gergen, 1985). Previous studies (e.g., Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Stephens & Malone, 2009) have shown that stakeholders affected by a crisis initiate communication to secure social support, including informational and emotional support. They become producers who enhance, shift, or even re-create organizational messages to fit their own comprehension of the events (Hallahan, 2010). Social actors in crises not only try to make sense of and react to crisis information, but also actively enact the social reality of the crisis. Moreover, they further act on the basis of this produced social reality (Weick, 1988). For example, Veil et al. (2012) demonstrated how one online community was able to create and widely distribute disparaging and unsubstantiated accusations about a company. Although these false claims did not constitute a real threat, the public perceived the threat to exist, which in turn resulted in a public relations and financial crisis for the company. In this sense, multiple social actors are able to generate information outside the official organizational narrative to fit their goals, be they altruistic or selfish. Therefore, the explanations provided by multiple actors are not necessarily the same.

Second, the third dimension emphasizes that there are numerous possible social constructions of the world from various social actors, because the construction of social reality is based on people's experiences and interpretations. The realities constructed by multiple social actors can assume a wide variety of forms. Social reality is produced and reproduced in communication between people in groups, cultures, and societies. Existing CCMR has yielded the following findings: (1) there are competing narratives from multiple social actors (e.g., Schultz & Raupp, 2010); (2) there is interdependency between multiple social actors (e.g., Bowen & Heath, 2007; Tyler, 2005); and (3) there is a discrepancy between the crisis realities produced by public relations personnel, journalists, organizations, and individuals (e.g., Hooper & Fearn-Banks, 2006).

Context – societal context awareness

The fourth dimension of SCCR considers contextual influences on a crisis beyond the organizational level and further examines the impact of social-structural and social-historical variables on crisis communication. An awareness of both meaning and broader contexts, as well as explicit efforts to understand the relationship between the two, are essential to social constructionism (Foster & Bochner, 2007).

Most literature in the sample considers a crisis to be a social phenomenon and extends the examination of contexts to the macro level, including politics, economics, media systems, and cultural traits. Some studies focus on specific national contexts, such as Sweden (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide, 2006), Israel (e.g., Meyers & Rozen, 2014), Canada (e.g., Greenberg & Hier, 2001), or China (e.g., H. Zhao et al., 2017). These attempts offer valuable opportunities to see how similar triggering events fare in national contexts that generate different demonstrations. For example, by comparing local media coverage in South Korea, China, and the United States, Dai and Hyun (2010) found that national political interest is relevant when constructing a global crisis (e.g., the North Korean nuclear crisis) at the local and national levels. Similarly, Meyers and Rozen (2014) revealed how civil-military-media interrelations in Israel significantly influenced the media construction of the Kishon River crisis.

Other studies have further scrutinized the social construction of crisis from the reception perspective by exploring contextual influences on crisis messages (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Greenberg & Hier, 2001). For example, Greenberg and Hier (2001) argued that the construction of crises as a symptom of failure needs to find resonance with the experiences of individuals and groups. Hence, the social construction of a crisis involves more than merely the linguistic and narrative forms that social actors provide to audiences. Rather, the social construction of a crisis must speak to the life experiences, hopes, and anxieties of the audience in a specific context and generate outcomes that have implications and promote interpretations that are implicitly implied in a specific context.

Based on broader contextual awareness, scholars who take a social constructionist approach propose more complex analytical schemas to examine the multiple dimensions of contexts during crises. For example, Schultz and Raupp (2010) noted that a crisis is mostly inter-systemically and inter-

organizationally co-constructed. They proposed an integrated micro-meso-macro level perspective to examine the joint effects of multiple-level contexts, including the interpersonal, the organizational, and the societal contexts. Similarly, in their theory of the rhetorical arena, Frandsen and Johansen (2017) suggested examining contexts in multiple dimensions, from the cognitive aspect of individuals to the sociological level of society. In their work, contexts were categorized into internal (psychological) and external (sociological) contexts.

Three approaches to social constructionist crisis research

While the four dimensions depict the common features or attributes of SCCR, the way SCCR frames crises as social constructions is philosophically complex, multifaceted, and methodologically diverse. To address RQ2 about the different ways of conducting social constructionist crisis research, this section proposes three approaches to capture the differences within SCCR: the terminological approach, the complexity-based approach, and the framing approach. Each of these three approaches provides a different definition of the term *social construction* and its relation to crisis. There is thus a need to identify crucial conceptual and methodological distinctions among these definitions in order to demonstrate their respective contributions. This section proposes three different approaches to identify and understand these different definitions, including conceptual, theoretical, and methodological distinctions. Table 2 plots social constructionist theories and research to demonstrate their respective contributions.

Terminological approach

Drawing from a rhetorical heritage that interprets a crisis as an interruption of organizational narratives that demands new and appropriate rhetorical enactments (Heath, 2004), the terminological approach in SCCR understands crises as terminological creations conceived by human agents and consequently managed and resolved terminologically (Hearit & Courtright, 2004). By emphasizing that rhetoric is inherently dialogic, the terminological approach considers crises as coauthored, co-created, and socially constructed narratives, and asserts that multiple participants jointly manufacture crises.

However, because rhetoric takes its rationale from the efforts humans make to influence one another, which are necessary interactions in society (Heath, 2009), the terminological approach in SCCR is interested in influencing the narratives of society by terminologically controlling the construction of meaning during crises. Although scholars following a terminological approach acknowledge the role of language in constructing the crisis narrative, their text-level focus is rather managerial and organization-focused. The terminological approach mainly focuses on how to exert terminological influence in order to symbolically resolve a crisis (e.g., Hearit & Courtright, 2003). Accordingly, they suggest some strategic guidelines regarding how messages must be proved, structured, framed, and worded. For Hearit and Courtright (2003, 2004) drew our attention to the competing vocabularies, terminologies, and narratives used during crises, recommending that organizations choose their words more cautiously when responding to a crisis.

Framing approach

The framing approach in SCCR is interested in exploring how meaning is constructed during crises, often drawing on Weick's works (1995, 2001). The framing approach considers sensemaking to be a process of social construction involving the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalize what people are doing (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). For example, Schultz and Raupp (2010) examined crisis attribution as a product of collective meaning-making and of ongoing negotiation through a complex interplay among crisis communicators, including the media, the government, and corporations. They concluded that social actors have different strategies for

Table 2. Three approaches to social constructionist crisis research.

Approach	Research focuses	Main theories	Research methods	Perspective	Related discipline	The goal of communication	Views of social construction and crisis	Measurement of social construction	Representative authors and works
Terminological approach	Text: Crisis response strategy, rhetorical choices, terminological influence	Apologia	Case study	Organization	Rhetoric	Symbolically resolve the crisis.	Crisis are both created and resolved terminologically.	Terminology as a reflection, selection, and deflection of reality.	Hearit and Courtright (2003, 2004)
Framing approach	Meaning: Content of communication and constructions of reality, structure, and meaning of responsibility attributions	Framing theory	Quantitative and qualitative content analysis/semantic network analysis	Inter-system and inter-organization	Organizational studies, political communication.	Influence the interpretation and construction of reality.	Attribution of responsibility and definition of solutions are social constructed.	Sensemaking, sensegiving, framing.	Schultz et al. (2012), Meyers and Rozen (2014), Andon and Free (2014)
Complexity-based approach	Context: Multicultural crisis communication, pre-crisis	Complexity theory	Case study, interview, document analysis, observation	Public	Intercultural communication	Produce a mutual understanding of the reality among participants.	Crisis is a perceptual phenomenon, produced and reproduced by the meaning that emerges in interaction between actors.	Constructive relationship between organizations and the public, the meaning creation and interpretation of publics.	Falkheimer and Heide (2006), Zeng and Dai (2015), H. Zhao et al. (2017)

developing and accomplishing their constructions of reality in order to maintain control of the situation and of institutional changes. Similarly, for Meyers and Rozen (2014), understanding what transforms an event into a crisis requires understanding how the involved actors (i.e., journalists, critics/accusers, and their targets) jointly contribute to the construction of the meaning of an event.

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) is employed by constructionist scholars to elaborate on the development of plausible meanings. Thus, sensemaking is about connecting cues and frames to create an account of what is going on in times of crisis (Schultz et al., 2013; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & Van Atteveldt, 2012). Drawing on knowledge from framing theory, these scholars investigate how the framing process (i.e., selecting cues, bracketing them from the environment, weaving connections among them, and giving salience to certain cues) contributes to the interpretation and construction of crisis realities (e.g., Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). In this way, the frames are used to define what the controversy is about, i.e., the essence of the issue (Garrison & Modigliani, 1994). Following this understanding, scholars who take a social constructionist approach not only focus on sensemaking, constructing interpretations primarily related to organizations, but also on sensegiving, “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and the meaning construction of others” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). For example, Schultz and her colleagues noted the sensemaking and sensegiving processes in crisis communication are active and strategic endeavors (Schultz & Raupp, 2010).

Complexity-based approach

Building on the complexity-based understanding of a crisis (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2008), some scholars adopt the social constructionist approach to explore the complex and unpredictable character of a crisis. The goal of the complexity-based approach is not to find universal tools and techniques for damage control, but rather to identify the polyvocal responses required by complex, integrated, and processual crisis situations (Bechler, 2004; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Tyler, 2005). They observed that crisis events may be influenced by several social-structural variables (e.g., political, cultural, or social values), organizational variables (e.g., social norms and values), and individual or ideological variables (e.g., ideological or political orientations). For example, Falkheimer and Heide (2006) proposed multicultural crisis communication aspects to highlight the complexity and uncertainty of meaning construction and interpretation during crises. Ethnicity, defined as dynamic cultural identity, was used in their study to investigate complex meaning construction in different ethnic groups in times of crisis. From this camp, SCCR provides a more reflexive and broader approach to crisis construction and further touches on some dimensions of CCMR that have long been neglected (e.g., multicultural and internal crisis communication).

Relationships among the three approaches to SCCR

All three approaches to SCCR portray crisis as a social construction, but a comparison among them reveals different ways in which the “crisis” is socially constructed. More specifically, the terminological approach focuses on the ways in which social actors use language to reify crises. The framing approach centers the process of meaning construction in times of crisis, while the complexity-based approach anchors crises in societal contexts.

The risk is to treat them as mutually exclusive or incompatible. On the contrary, the three approaches interrelate and presuppose inherent relationships with each other. Specifically, the terms (terminological approach) by which we understand the world are socially, historically, and culturally situated (complexity-based approach); once in place, they both enable and constrain the meaning construction (framing approach). Thus, all three approaches to SCCR are necessary: engaging one approach in relation to another does not negate the strengths of either. Indeed, using the three approaches simultaneously can contribute to revealing a more complex view of social construction and crisis.

Reflections on current SCCR

With regard to societal context awareness, crisis scholars who take a social constructionist approach take critical stances toward assumptions in this field by pointing out the distinction between the triggering event and meaning construction, examining multiple voices from multiple actors, and focusing on the specific role of language. Based on the review of sample publications, this study identified two weaknesses in the current SCCR and thereby revealed several opportunities and directions for future SCCR.

Interaction among multiple social actors

SCCR emphasizes crisis as a co-constructed reality – in particular, the synergistic effect among the social actors in the development of crises (Cross & Ma, 2015). Nevertheless, most existing SCCR tends to define the research domain on the basis of the primary and focused social actors. For example, some scholars have called for more attention to be placed on the public aspects of crisis communication (e.g., Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009; Lee, 2004; Moffitt, 1994), while others have examined crisis by differentiating “government crisis communication” from “corporate crisis communication” (e.g., Schultz & Raupp, 2010); and still others have focused on media construction of crises (e.g., Andon & Free, 2014; Joye, 2010; Meyers & Rozen, 2014). However, all these studies have assumed that multiple actors are isolated or act within their specific arenas.

Although fruitful, very little research has thus far aimed to reveal the pattern and mechanism of interactions and exchanges among social actors. Understanding crisis as a socially constructed phenomenon means that social actors construct their realities not only within their own boundaries, but also in collaboration with other social actors. Frandsen and Johansen’s (2017) theory of a “rhetorical arena” draws our attention to the same communicative environment in which multiple social actors engage. Hence, a holistic approach to crisis research requires examining how multiple social actors construct their reality through their interactions in the course of social life. That is, future crises studies using the social constructionist approach should focus on the interactions and negotiations among social actors (Meyers & Rozen, 2014). The exploration of concrete interaction and exchange among social actors can reveal the construction of crisis in a given setting.

Moving from “discourse” to “discourse”

SCCR has recognized that the representation of the world and reality are constituted by and operated through language. However, most existing SCCR continues to be limited to detailed micro analysis of *discourse* that refer to study text in social practices (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). For example, the terminological approach in SCCR narrowly focuses on the rhetorical construction of crisis (e.g., the crisis response message). Accordingly, cultural and institutional forces that lie beyond language use (Deetz, 1992; Derrida, 1988) are ignored. In other words, the terminological approach does not consider “*Discourse*” as a general and enduring system situated in historical contexts (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Conversely, most studies using the complexity approach do not consider how macro influences (e.g., politics, history, and culture) operate within micro representations (e.g., the crisis response message).

In this sense, what SCCR needs is more than a shift from “discourse” to “Discourse”³: SCCR needs to accommodate both (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 1993). The investigation of “discourse” during a crisis needs to go further into “deconstructing” texts, taking them apart, and showing how they work to present us with a particular vision of the world, including social, historical, and cultural representations. The locus of observation should focus not only on social, political, and economic contexts, but also on hegemonic and material constraints that often lie beyond a social actor’s awareness. By casting social actors into the background and placing key components like ideologies and power/authority structures in the foreground, the features that constraint, justify,

obscure, or mystify the interests of the powerful come to light (Mumby, 2001). In this way, a comprehensive exploration of “Discourse” can be realized, one that can address the macro processes of “discourse” that embody micro actions.

Implications for crisis communication theory and research

This section continues the discussion on the ways in which social constructionism could advance crisis communication theory and research. As Deetz (1992) suggested, the development of communication theory should direct attention and focus rather than characterize the intrinsic nature of objects or mirror the fixed attributes among them. Following Deetz’s advice, the review of the literature has revealed multiple opportunities and directions for future research from the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication.

Exploring human experience in CCMR

Social constructionism argues that crises should be treated as social products and processes rather than objective entities that exist independently of the humans who assess and experience them. SCCR acknowledges the physical existence of objective phenomena (e.g., triggering events) while at the same time paying attention to the human experience (e.g., perception, interpretation, and definition) of these objective phenomena.

The social constructionist perspective, which takes human experience into account, has valuable explanatory power because it can help crisis scholars to (1) Rethink the underlying assumptions about crisis that have established traditional crisis communication theories. For example, the questions raised include whether the direct and decontextualized use of “definitive” characteristics identified by crisis communication theories refer to real division or exhaust all possibilities in acute crises (Gilpin & Murphy, 2012; B. F. Liu & Pompper, 2012). (2) Explore the nuanced understanding of the causes of crises: why numerous cases in which the structure of the system would anticipate a crisis, but it failed to materialize. Or, there was nothing in the structure to indicate a potential crisis, yet human interpretation defined an event as a crisis anyway (Cross & Ma, 2015). More precisely, the social constructionist perspectives remind crisis researchers that the explanations of triggering events are as equally vital as their factual features. In this regard, the interpretive construction of triggering events should also be included when evaluating the crisis situation: what is being talked about, and how the triggering events and organizations involved are discussed.

Integrating societal contexts in CCMR

The social constructionist perspectives draw attention to the social interaction process through which social actors constantly interact to make sense of uncertain and ambiguous crisis situations in a particular social setting. Crises are thus not absolute, but rather local and contextual. By emphasizing that crises are specific to particular times, places, and cultures, SCCR situates crisis construction in many nations of the world. Wisdom from all over the world can help challenge the Western cultural premises that have shaped much research in the field (Diers-Lawson, 2017) and contribute to building a holistic scholarship of crisis communication. An extension of such assumptions is needed if crisis communication theory in particular, and public relations theory in general, are to be more widely applicable.

Furthermore, social constructionist perspectives include the consideration of broader social structures that may perpetuate or be influenced by a specific form of crisis construction. For one thing, as Grunig (1992) pointed out, the social environment that surrounds an organization affects the structure and practices of its public relations function. To examine the impacts of contexts on crisis communication, we need to go beyond the organizational domain and explore more complex analytical schemas. The integrated micro-meso-macro contexts model (Schultz & Raupp, 2010) and the theory

of rhetorical arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017) are exemplary in this regard, as these two theories locate crisis in reconfiguring the dynamics among multiple dimensions of contexts. For another, the consideration of broader social structures encourages researchers to transcend the instrumental management view of crisis communication and management, and to discover its impact on society. This study argues that this approach is most convincing, as it helps broaden the scope of crisis communication research by confirming its value in serving not only organizational interests, but also the interests of society.

Facilitating critical perspectives on CCMR

Social constructionism notes that while reality is always socially defined, it is individuals and groups of individuals who define it (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Social actors always try to present themselves and their version of events in such a way that they will prevail over other versions. For Burr (2015), this is linked to power, in that those who occupy positions with privileged access to the “means of social construction” (e.g., economic, political, cultural, and technological) contribute more significantly to the construction of reality than those who are marginalized or excluded from such access (Mouzelis, 2016). While SCCR is deeply concerned with the coexistence of multiple social actors and multiple realities in crisis construction, little attention has been paid to the ways in which social relations of power mediate in the process. This study argues that the social construction of crisis is not only involved in the process of negotiating meaning, but is also inherent in the means by which the superiority of certain constructions are produced and reproduced. In this sense, the social constructionist inquiry is necessarily moral, ethical, and critical. *Power*, therefore, is a useful concept, one that provides a way of scrutinizing the generation (or regeneration) of domination during crisis communication. CCMR could expand the research focus to the language in use to discover more of the explanatory possibilities of power enactment.

Moving beyond laboratories

In addition to the theoretical implications noted above, the current study offers a methodological implication that SCCR entails an interpretive perspective in interrogating crises within their social contexts by reconciling the subjective interpretations of the social actors involved therein.

The social scientific approach to crisis communication (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Jin & Cameron, 2007) is a milestone in CCMR that has rigorously pushed the research field forward both theoretically and empirically (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). The social scientific approach develops predictive frameworks that uncover various crisis variables that determine the crisis communication process. While predictive frameworks have recognized the constitutive role of communication, they have also identified social constructions of crises as naturally occurring phenomena. The research object is decontextualized and removed from everyday meanings of life. As such, researchers conceptualize and quantify the constructs to posit them as crises. The uncovering of the essence of human experience, however, is lacking from the exploration. Even though some studies have acknowledged crises as being socially constructed, there is a risk of reverting back to the contradictory stance of social constructionism.

Social constructionist perspectives on CCMR maintain the tension between crisis variables and societal factors. Therefore, the research setting should go beyond the laboratory and focus on social interactions during actual crises, in which crisis communication could be studied as a constitutive process governed by situated rules rather than universal laws. More specifically, crisis researchers could consider the research objects from natural sources, such as texts that offer spontaneously occurring accounts of actual crises (e.g., Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegthart, 2014; X. Zhao et al., 2018). By scrutinizing the use of language in specific contexts, crisis researchers should try to reveal broader patterns that might be applied to similar local contexts.

Furthermore, the interpretive perspective would be valuable for advancing CCMR, as it “recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understandings of subjects’ meanings” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 154). The interpretive perspective can help crisis researchers to explore social actors’ subjective or inter-subjective experiential words (meanings) and to analyze discourse (text). In this sense, the interpretive perspective is not only about qualitative methods that aim to capture subjects’ authentic intentions, meanings, or experiences, but also about analyzing data at a macro sociological level as the representatives of social contexts.

Limitations and research directions

Although this research offers important implications, several limitations must be noted here. First, this study only analyzed the published literature in the communication and management disciplines. This means that this study did not fully represent the corpus of crisis research that draws on social constructionist perspectives. Future studies may consider expanding the sample size by conducting keyword searches in the interdisciplinary literature. Second, some SCCR invoked social constructionism without explicitly referring to its key terms. For example, those studies that used methods related to social constructionism but did not explicitly state their philosophical stance may have been excluded from the search. Third, debates and critiques of social constructionism were not included in this study. Future studies can review how such debates and critiques influence the application of social constructionism to CCMR.

Conclusion

This study presented a range of social constructionist perspectives on CCMR as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the existing literature. The current research argues that SCCR would be more valuable and informative if researchers were to apply it in a more consistent and systematized way. To this end, this work developed a four-dimensional model as a theory-based tool for researchers to clarify and reflect on the social constructionist stance. Furthermore, this study examined three divergent approaches to SCCR. These approaches can serve as starting points for crisis researchers to explore a broader range of alternative approaches to studying crisis.

Additionally, this study argued that the implications of social constructionist perspectives for crisis communication theory, research, and practice – based on a different appreciation of language, meaning, context, and crisis itself – are substantial. In particular, SCCR advances the culturally and contextually sensitive aspects of CCMR. This study recommends that the managerial perspective and the social constructionist perspective be considered mutually complementary. By viewing crisis as socially constructed, CCMR should investigate what crisis communication is in society, not only what it should be at an organizational level. In this way, the social constructionist perspective would extend the range of applications of crisis communication theory in particular and public relations theory in general.

Notes

1. This study occasionally refers to crisis communication and crisis management research (CCMR). This is not only because crisis management is the source of and broader context for crisis communication (Coombs, 2010), but also because there is “no crisis management without communication, and no crisis communication without management, when a crisis breaks out” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 10).
2. *Communication Sources* (670 full-text peer-reviewed journals) is one of the most comprehensive communications databases and offers information on mass media, communications theory, linguistics, organizational communication, phonetics, and speech pathology. *Business Source Complete* (1,300 full-text peer-reviewed journals) covers all disciplines of business, including marketing, management, accounting, banking, and finance.
3. Gee (2011) made a distinction between “discourse” and “Discourse.” The term discourse (lower case d) refers to language in use, namely verbal interactions and sequences of utterances, among people. The term of Discourse

(upper case D) captures “the ways in which people enact and recognize socially and historically significant social identities through combinations of language, actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs, and values” (Gee, 2015, p. 418). According to Gee (2011), “Discourse” sets a broader context for the analysis of “discourse.” The distinction between discourse and Discourse is made to recognize the interrelationships between social contexts and situational use of language.

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Appendix A Full List of Publications Analyzed in the Review of Literature

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