Emerging and Noteworthy Theories

I like adventures, and I’m going to find some.
—Louisa May Alcott

This chapter discusses more recent, emerging theories in business communication and a few deserving ones which our survey process may have overlooked. We did not rank these worthy scholarly contributions using our survey criteria. We felt that doing so would give an unfair and negative impression of them due to their relative newness and/or lack of widespread recognition. Instead, we will present these models along with an overview of their general properties and impact on the discipline of business communication.

Equally important, we humbly admit that these theories are not all inclusive. In selecting theories for this chapter, we used expert opinion, chose those ideas which advance the entire field of business communication, and perhaps most significantly, picked those models that transcend research silos. This last consideration—research silos—describes how ideas in distinct specialties in our field can remain isolated, circulating with only a limited number of community members. In short, while we all belong to the same field, we are capable of conducting scholarship as if we exist in different ones. To thrive, business communication needs to increase the flow of ideas between our different silos—our field needs to enrich its networks of theory communication and adaptation.
The theories in this chapter show promise in creating such better connections between silos: in demonstrating convergent scholarship. To highlight the potential of these theories, we first look at new theories that have sprung from the ones which we identified through our survey. These innovations showcase how our field has begun to extend models so that they can better cross ideological and methodological boundaries that often confine researchers. Next, we look at theories that are path-breaking perspectives by incorporating mental models which are external to our field. These theories infuse business communication research by integrating other disciplines into our scholarship.

As you should see with the theories in this chapter, two major silos in our field arise from the discursive and psychological views of business communication. Discursive research strategies are often inductive (aspiring to discover a truth through inquiry) with qualitative methodologies which seek to identify how meaning is created via communication (Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2013; Walker, 2014, 2014). In comparison, psychological research strategies tend to be more deductive (aspiring to conduct inquiry based on a certain truth) with quantitative methodologies which seek to capture generalizable communication impacts on organizational outcomes (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2013; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017; Walker, 2014). You will often find such a gap linked to a study which is anchored in one specific discipline. For example, an organizational communication or linguistics scholar may adopt a discursive lens which is theoretically confined to their discipline whereas a management or information systems scholar might select a psychological approach which is theoretically restricted to business literature. In all fairness to researchers, academic publication processes often do exert pressure for such narrow scopes. And more importantly, both perspectives offer valuable contributions to our field.

Yet at times we need a combination of discursive and psychological approaches to reach the heart of vital research questions. Fortunately, a number of scholars and some academic journals have evolved to transcend the research silos which pose a risk of fragmenting the field of business communication and impeding its progress toward becoming a mature science (Kuhn, 1996; Miner, 2003). Certain business communication theories are replete with multi-disciplinary theoretical foundations, research questions, and methodologies. We have already presented examples of these contributions in this book. Now we apply this framework for showcasing some exciting new directions in this chapter.
To discuss the emerging and noteworthy business communication theories, we will first cover recent, meaningful extensions of existing theories which we previously described in this book. Then, we move on to present other innovations, including some of the noteworthy theories which our survey did not capture. Before we start, special thanks go out to our expert multi-disciplinary panel who guided us in the selection process: Drs. Ryan Bisel (University of Oklahoma), Rita Men (University of Florida), and Jef Naidoo (University of Alabama). These scholars represent such diverse communication specialties as business administration, information systems, organizational communication, and public relations. In all, their input and knowledge have been invaluable resources for this chapter.

**Evolution of Core Theories**

To begin, we describe how certain core theories have branched out and evolved into new ones. These theories include structurational divergence theory, language divergence and meaning convergence theory, communication theory of resilience, and social network theory.

**Structurational Divergence Theory:** This theory arises from Giddens’ (1991) structuration theory, which our survey has classified as a core theory. As a quick recap, structuration theory contends that humans and structures interact to influence each other via communication. Both people and their environments exert agency which is communicated to shape each other (Bryant & Jary, 2014; Pagel & Westerfelhaus, in press).

Structurational divergence theory (SDT) occurs when two organizational structures are incompatible and intersect to communicate an energy-draining human experience (SD Nexus) that results in a negative outcome (SD Cycle) (Malterud & Nicotera, in press; Nicotera et al., 2015). An apt example of this communication phenomenon happens with organizational role conflict and ambiguity (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). An employee may receive conflicting or unclear messages about performance expectations such as when healthcare professionals must balance their patient attentiveness with documentation requirements. These inconsistent demands (structural roles) can generate role conflict and ambiguity which subsequently lower job satisfaction, create burnout, and raise turnover among nurses (Nicotera et al., 2015).
Importantly, structurational divergence theory spans disciplinary boundaries with conceptual foundations in both organizational communication and organizational behavior.

**Language Convergence and Meaning Divergence:** This theory is rooted in sense-making, another core theory which our survey identified. To refresh, sense-making theory captures the human tendency and motivation to extract meaning from our environments. People enact the sense-making processes (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Weick, 1993, 2007) through communication, and these processes have seven attributes: social (we interact with our surroundings and others), retrospective (we glean meaning from retroactive reflection), cues which we perceive, identity (we anchor sense-making in ourselves), enactment (behaviors), ongoing, and plausible (our known—and dynamic—environment bounds how we interpret meaning). Congruently, sense-making accents how organizational participants reach agreed meaning.

The theory of language convergence and meaning divergence (LC/MD) elaborates and extends sense-making. This recent theory incorporates elements of sense-making along with another related and notable business communication theory, symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1982, 1985), to investigate purported shared meanings that organizational members forge with common language. LC/MD extends our field of business communication knowledge by focusing a lens on the illusion of shared meaning in organizational language. In other words, commonly agreed-upon terms can diverge in their actual interpretations by different people (Dougherty, Kramer, Klatzke, & Rogers, 2009; Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016; Dixon & Dougherty, 2009). This perspective advances sense-making theory by looking at underlying disagreements within communication even where buy-in has been assumed. A good example of LC/MD is found with the wording and discourse of sexual harassment policy. Specifically, the perception of flirting has a wide range of variance (Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016). LC/MD also moves business communication theory forward by integrating the disciplines of organizational communication, organizational behavior, and social psychology.

**Communication Theory of Resilience:** Sense-making provides a similar key foundation for the communication theory of resilience (Buzzanell, 2018; Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). This latter theory has links to and yet is distinct from the psychological theory of
resilience (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017) which addresses how individuals overcome and even thrive from personal setbacks and challenges, including in the workplace. In comparison, the communication theory of resilience discursively investigates how people collectively interpret, come to terms with, and manage disruptive events. Unlike its psychological counterpart, communication resilience is more systematic involving multiple actors who influence each other. Dealing with the challenges posed by maternity leave is an appropriate example of organizational resilience in the business communication field, where multi-level factors come into play (Liu & Buzzanell, 2004).

Five communication processes are involved with organizational communication resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). These factors co-create a new normal sense of reality after a destabilizing event, bolstering identity anchors—self-descriptions that emerge through discourse among speech communication members, leveraging communication systems, reframing—repositioning the situational perspective, and accenting positive feelings while deemphasizing negative ones. This rich theoretical palette advances business communication theory through grafting psychological, organizational communication, and systems constructs to probe deeply into what it really means to bounce back after challenges in organizations.

**Social Network Theory:** Social network theory (Shumate & Contractor, 2013) is closely linked to another one of our survey’s core theories, actor network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2011). In brief, ANT proposes that all communication interactively flows between actors (entities that can receive, process, record, or send messages) within a network of heterogeneous channels. Actors can also be non-human (such as a scientific journal), and the networks are conceived as having no inherent hierarchy (no central communication flow control).

Social network theory expands and advances ANT by more extensively probing into the types of communicative influences that occur within these networks and by delving into what actually constitutes a network (Contractor & DeChurch, 2014; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019). Case in point, for many years business communication scholars have frequently based their research on the romance of leadership, the aura of leadership as a hierarchical communication flow that is rooted in a single individual (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016, 2017). Social network theory confronts this assumption by viewing leadership as a communicative, shared role which is contingent on network members’ behaviors and perceptions. Just as
important, social network theory investigates the outcomes of actor influ-
ences (frequently through discourse) within a given social network. For
instance, the relationships between leader member exchange and innova-
tion have been recently examined through a social network framework
(Wang and (Frank), Fang, Y., Qureshi, & Janssen, 2015).
These business communication knowledge inroads are particularly
relevant in the rapidly changing and complex environments of contem-
porary organizations. Moreover, social network theory spans disciplinary
silos by drawing from sociology, communication, information systems,
and management research streams (Dinh et al., 2014; Fairhurst &
Connaughton, 2013; Granovetter, 1977).

**Evolution of Major Theory**

Our discussion continues by looking at a more recent business commu-
nication theory that is linked to what our survey classified as major. The
selected theory is the moral mum effect.

**The Moral Mum Effect:** The moral mum effect (Bisel & Adame,
2019; Zanin, Bisel, & Adame, 2016) is rooted in both voice and silence
and the spiral of silence, theories which our survey classified as major and
notable, respectively. To review, voice and silence capture an organiza-
tional member’s willingness to *speak up or remain silent* about important
work issues, responses which strongly impact key employee and organ-
izational outcomes (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Morrison,
2014; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Its corollary, the spiral of
silence, is reinforcing behavior that results when group members remain
silent because they fear ostracism—even rejection—for speaking out against
normative opinion (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 2012).
Of note, a third related theory, organizational dissent theory (Kassing,
Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, 2012), eluded classification in our survey,
but is nonetheless significant and linked to the moral mum effect. Simply
put, organizational dissent theory identifies the reasons for and the behav-
iors of employees who choose to express disagreement about work issues
with higher ups.

The moral mum effect extends and enriches these theories through
highlighting communicative, ethical behaviors. Scholars within this
research stream have discovered that supervisors, and culture can influ-
ence members’ ethical actions through messages. With an original twist,
the moral mum effect demonstrates how organizational communication
can move members toward ethically responsible choices. For example, followers are more likely to express dissent about immoral work policies and feel less anxiety about doing so when leaders openly discuss and voice support for ethical choices in the workplace (Adame & Bisel, 2019; Bisel & Adame, 2019; Zanin et al., 2016). Finally, another emergent theory, ethically reliable organizations (Bisel, 2017; Vogus, Rothman, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2014), intersects with the moral mum effect and will be covered later in this chapter.

Why does the moral mum effect matter in advancing business communication theory? First, the moral mum effect directly addresses the growing concern about ethically responsible organizational behavior through a communicative perspective. Going further, the moral mum effect embraces multiple disciplines (organizational communication, management, psychology, and others) in both theoretical foundations and research methodology. Lastly, this theory progresses our business communication knowledge through building on important conceptual precedents.

**Evolution of Focused Theory**

Compelling new insights have been contributed to business communication from researchers who have transformed dialogic theory, which our survey classified as focused. These advancements, mainly initiated by public relations scholars, reconfigure communication in organizations of the twenty-first century and will be discussed next as the dialogic theory of communication and digital dialogic communication theories.

**Dialogic and Digital Dialogic Theories of Communication:** The theories of dialogic communication and digital dialogic communication are closely associated with dialogic theory in our survey’s focused ranking. Keep in mind that dialogic theory (McClellan, 1989) began as a literary theory that incorporated mutual engagement of all involved parties. Building from this idea of communicative equality, the dialogic theory of communication has moved forward to include digital communications with digital dialogic theory and through prioritizing the relational quality of interactions with stakeholders (Kent, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Symmetry of communications between involved parties is a central tenet of the dialogic and digital dialogic theories of communication and will be discussed later in this chapter with symmetrical communication, an emergent theory (Men, 2014a).
The primary elements of the dialogic and digital dialogic theories of communication rest on the presence of an interactive feedback loop between stakeholders (internal and external) and include five factors. These are *propinquity* (communication is dynamic and spontaneous), *risk* due to the vulnerability elicited by inclusive messages, *commitment* by engaged parties to respectful communications, *empathy* or the motivation to understand and accept other viewpoints, and *mutuality* or the belief that democratic dialog with stakeholders is a prioritized goal and in the organization’s best interest (Kent, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

The dialogic and digital dialogic theories of communication are highly impactful to business communication scholarship and practice. Nor should application of these theories be restricted to public relations research. In fact, both theories interweave knowledge and methodologies from various disciplines including rhetoric, organizational communication, information systems, and management among others. In addition, the principles of the dialogic and digital dialogic theories of communication can be applied in diverse settings including leadership interactions with knowledge/empowered workers and in Web-based environments.

**Innovative and Noteworthy Theoretical Contributions**

This chapter section discusses mostly recent theories that are transformative to the field of business communication. Transformative refers to an idea that is novel and modifies a stakeholder’s worldview. Again, we admit that some deserving theories have been omitted from this group despite our rigorous efforts. Achieving consensus in a multi-disciplinary area is not an easy task even with the wealth of valuable input gathered from the survey and through the expert opinion seeking steps. Hopefully, readers will send us feedback so that we can update our list since we view it as an ongoing process. We begin by presenting the theories of excellence, symmetrical communication, authenticity in communication.

**Theories of Excellence, Symmetrical Communication, and Authenticity in Communication:** These three theories were initially grounded in the discipline of public relations, but their relevance has expanded to the entire field of business communication and beyond as the next few paragraphs will point out. Excellence theory (Grunig, 1992a; Grunig & Grunig, 2008) serves as a springboard for symmetrical communication
and authenticity in communication. Excellence theory grows the role of the public relations professional to become a vital communications linking pin, embedded in stakeholder strategy (Freeman & McVea, 2001; McVea & Freeman, 2005). A stakeholder strategic perspective is democratic and inclusive, giving voice and participation to all key involved parties (both internal and external constituents). Relatedly, excellence theory seeks two-way (symmetrical—replacing command and control models) communication exchanges between stakeholders that reflect equality and include the voices of traditionally marginalized groups such as women, people of color, ethnic or religious minorities, the disabled, etc. In other words, excellence theory in communication practice embraces diversity (Grunig & Dozier, 2009).

There are other important attributes of excellence theory. It is goal oriented (driven by outcomes that capture organizational and employee well-being) and adopts the philosophy that communication which is in the stakeholders’ best interests becomes an organizational priority. For example, discriminatory communication can produce lower public engagement and costly lawsuits. Moreover, excellence theory places high weight on ethical communication, including honesty and transparency (Grunig & Dozier, 2009; Grunig & Grunig, 2008). Even though excellence theory was originally targeted for public relations professionals, it has migrated into other disciplines including management, especially with LMX theory. In this framework, excellence has been incorporated as reaching out to better engage millennial employees (Graen & Schiemann, 2013).

A major dimension of excellence theory is symmetrical communication (Men, 2014a; Men & Sung, in press). This theory examines internal employee communications and advocates for equality and consideration in such exchanges, in contrast to the pervasive top-down approach which is often practiced by managers. In essence, symmetrical communication is employee centered, egalitarian, and transparent—promoting high performance and well-being (Grunig, 1992b; Men, 2014a). And symmetrical communication has been supported as strengthening employee attitudes of trust, organizational identification, and commitment—all which link to critical outcomes including performance and relationships with external stakeholders (Men, 2014a). A more recent stream of symmetrical communication inquiry delves into leadership behaviors which nurture, align with, and integrate it into strategic management and organizational
Another key element of excellence theory is authentic communication. Authentic communication is closely associated with authentic leadership in organizational behavior (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Such leaders are characterized by honest interpersonal relations, self-awareness, objective self-evaluation and review of information, and loyalty to personal values and beliefs (Shen & Kim, 2012). (Needless to say, authentic leadership is rated on a spectrum rather than as an absolute state.) Business communication interprets these factors as strategic messages of fairness, inclusion, mutual respect, and learning from mistakes which are diffused throughout an entire enterprise (Molleda & Jain, 2013; Shen & Kim, 2012). In one application, authentic communication theory has been supported as a mediator between symmetrical communication and resultant high caliber relationships within an organization (Shen & Kim, 2012).

All three communication theories, excellence, symmetrical, and authentic, are very relevant to solidifying business communication as a discipline. These emerging perspectives respond to shifts in the business environment where organizations seek collaborative and empowered employees. Furthermore, these schools of thought build disciplinary bridges with foundations in psychology, organizational communication, strategy, organizational behavior, and certainly public relations. Plus, researchers in these streams have adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. Moreover, excellence, symmetrical, and authentic communication are results oriented, based on the commendable vision that organizations thrive when their people flourish. Finally, ethical communication is integral to this vision and will be the focal point of our next theory, ethically reliable organizations (ERO) (Adame & Bisel, 2019; Bisel & Adame, 2019).

**Ethically Reliable Organizations**: The theory of ethically reliable organizations (ERO) matters to business communication because of its looming relevance to contemporary organizations. We are challenged regularly by media stories which disclose unethical and illegal activities on the part of organizations. In response, scholars in the EROs research community investigate these phenomena within a discursive scope. For a clearer exposition, we invite you to visit the origins and facets of EROs.
Ethically reliable organizations (Bisel, 2017; Husted, 1993) refine the moral mum effect by presenting positive alternatives for expression and are grounded in high reliability organizational (HRO) theory (Vogus et al., 2014; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). This theory describes organizations which deliver consistently superb performance even when managing crises, such as firefighters and medical emergency room teams. (Note that an enterprise doesn't have to be faced with life and death circumstances to become an HRO). An HRO is distinguished by the following attributes: continuous organizational learning, vigilance for risks and failures, a culture that prioritizes safety, transparent and egalitarian dissemination of information, rapid and synchronized responses to unprecedented events, and open investigation of organizational failures (Vogus et al., 2014).

HROs have been extended to ERO which display a culture of high ethical standards, a firm commitment to interpersonal empathy and respect, an elevated status for moral learning, leader encouragement of upward dissent and listening to one’s heart in ethical decision-making, and a resistance to the oversimplification of moral reasoning in organizations (Adame & Bisel, 2019; Bisel & Adame, 2019). As this description suggests, many of these behaviors are communicative and the field of business communication has adapted ERO theory for scholarly investigation and practice. For example, a recent study supported the influence of supervisor-follower ethical discourse on moral decision-making and associated anxiety about resistance to an unethical request (Bisel & Adame, 2019).

ERO theory progresses the field of business communication in multiple ways. First, it is multi-disciplinary with major tenets rooted in organizational communication, management, and business ethics theories. Second, ERO theory incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as experimental design. Third, ERO is pragmatic and manifests actionable paths to implementation. Finally, ERO mirrors the changing nature of organizational landscapes where ethical communication and employee well-being are gaining refreshing importance. In a similar vein, another very new business communication theory, the theory of respectful inquiry (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018), addresses how leaders communicate in the best interests of followers, and is featured next.

**Theory of Respectful Inquiry:** The theory of respectful inquiry refers to leader initiated linguistics which encourage intrinsic motivation in followers’ perceptions/reactions. Van Quaquebeke and Felps defined
Respectful inquiry as a “multidimensional construct of asking questions in an open way and subsequently listening intently” (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018, p. 8). From these conversational episodes, leaders elicit follower motivation. In turn, this motivation translates into meaningful outcomes such as higher retention, job satisfaction, and performance (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Note that the term respectful plays a crucial role in this theory, and this aspect of the theory underlines how leaders’ communicative actions can be perceived by followers as being treated with dignity. These perceptions allow leaders to develop rewarding and genuine communication relationships with their followers as a result. When leaders forge such communication relationships, the theory posits that follower motivation occurs by fulfilling their inherent needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the core elements of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). In this sense, respectful inquiry proposes a much more follower centered framework than traditional command and control models of leader communication.

Respectful inquiry also factors in the antecedents of the leader’s own needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness must first be met in order to practice this construct well. Moreover, the leader’s situational influences of time pressure, cognitive load, and physical distance temper the resonance of respectful inquiry exchanges. For example, adequate time, a reasonable cognitive load, and physical proximity may help a leader to ask the right questions, listen effectively, and have a genuine openness to a follower’s questions. Ironically, the motivational impact of respectful inquiry is expected to be stronger when any of these three elements are weak. Additional contextual moderators have been theorized such as degrees of organizational control, leader power differential, and subordinate intrinsic motivational needs saturation. Furthermore, history matters. In other words, respectful inquiry is expected to be more motivational when the leader and follower share a positive relationship track record.

To date, this theory awaits formal testing, but it holds much promise. The reasons for business communication researchers to further investigate respectful inquiry are compelling. The founding scholars envision that future refinements can expand the level of analysis to peers, groups, and organizations. Besides, respectful inquiry is truly multi-disciplinary—drawing from organizational communication, psychology, and organizational behavior literature. Going further, respectful inquiry provides
an opportunity to apply innovative methodologies that integrate experimental designs. And importantly, this theory is quite pragmatic since it explicitly demonstrates the how of communicative motivation which results in improved organizational and employee outcomes (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017; Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Continuing our discussion of new business communication theories which embed concern for employee well-being, we move next into communication research on microaggressions.

**Communication Studies of Microaggressions**: The theory of microaggressions originated in psychology (Sue et al., 2007) and is not new, but relevant business communication research is starting to emerge in this stream. Microaggressions have been defined as “subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities, as well as to women and other historically stigmatized groups, that implicitly communicate or at least engender hostility” (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 139). Such behaviors often leave the targeted person anxious and unsure about the microaggressor’s true intent. For instance, a female faculty member may wonder whether a male colleague refers to all professors as “he” because he is uninformed or discriminating. Although microaggressions can be unintentional, the ultimate outcome is perceived exclusion by a member of the marginalized group. Microaggression targets can range from nationality, religion, disability, race, gender identification, age, political beliefs to others. Basically any organizational member with characteristics that do not align with a culture’s prevailing norms is a candidate for microaggression.

Examples of business communication microaggressions theory scholarship include two recent articles. The first one used critical sense-making to explore how immigrant employees psychologically process microaggressive messages at work (Shenoy-Packer, 2015). The second study investigated the often murky territory between political correctness (communication hypersensitivity about inclusiveness) and microaggressions. More precisely, it asked questions about how microaggressions are perceived by organizational members and how these perceptions influence group decision-making outcomes (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2017).

Communication research about microaggression is transformative to the field of business communication for multiple reasons. Above all, it responds to the admirable vision of nurturing inclusive organizations. Research informs us that such contexts are desirable for producing employee, organizational, ethical, and societal well-being (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Grant, 2013). The probability
of building interpersonal acceptance into organizational behaviors will be reduced if we are unable to articulate, confront, and deter communicative microaggression at work.

Similarly, communication studies of microagression fit well with our boundary-spanning criterion for selecting new theories. These theoretical advances were initiated in the discipline of psychology. Yet more recently, business communication researchers have extended the construct of microaggression by showing how it is explicitly articulated through both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Next, we visit the transformative qualities of our final entry in this chapter, communication studies in responsible management.

**Communication Studies in Responsible Management:**

CSR and Crisis Communication

The concept of responsible management synthesizes multiple perspectives about ethical organizational behaviors encompassing leadership, societal stewardship, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and crisis management (Carroll, 1991; Carroll et al., 2020). Although responsible management formally began in such areas as strategy, business ethics, and organizational behavior, there are deep roots in organizational communication research, including the critical discourse and the interpretive schools (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2013; Putnam & Mumby, 2013). Importantly, organizational communication has a tradition of critically examining managerial values and moral behaviors. Two germane, new research streams in business communication are corporate social responsibility (CSR) and crisis communications.

**CSR Communication:** CSR communication is defined in this book as “a communicative practice, which corporations [organizations] undertake to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders” (Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018, p. 492). The major goals of CSR communication are management of organizational image, perceptions, identification, and accountability/legitimacy regarding internal and external stakeholders which translate into favorable affective and behavioral outcomes (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Heath, Saffer, & Waymer, 2017).
Insightful progress is being forged with CSR communication research. New studies have examined the real-world implications of CSR communication practices. For example, scholars are posing questions about the challenges faced by small and medium enterprises when implementing CSR communications (Morsing & Spence, 2019) and about relevant interactions with social media (Heath et al., 2017). Plus these inroads include investigations from non-corporate stakeholders’ perspectives (Chung & Lee, in press; Kim & Rim, in press). We also believe this stream of research in business communication is transformative because of its pertinence to modern society, multi-disciplinary foundations, and its adoption of diverse methodological tools, such as discourse analysis, quantitative surveys, and experimental designs. Going further, CSR communications scholarship can be found in a wide span of disciplines including public relations, management, business ethics, organizational communication, strategy, and others.

**Crisis Communication:** Another type of emergent, significant business communication research in responsible management is crisis communication. This topic hits home for many of us. Even as we write this book, the entire world and consequently most organizations are deeply challenged by an unprecedented crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond this grim reality, we have all witnessed an ongoing series of riveting organizational events such as the Wells Fargo debacle, Pennsylvania State University’s sex scandal, and Volkswagen’s emissions cover-up in the new millennium. Information about these occurrences spreads at warp speed in virtually connected media too.

So it is not surprising that organizational communication about crises has experienced much recent theoretical development with major implications for practice. We merely offer a thumbnail sketch of certain prominent crisis communication perspectives here, but hope that it will inspire further exploration on your part. Let’s begin with a working definition of crisis communication. We adopt the one put forth by Coombs (2007, p. 164). “A crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat. Crises can harm stakeholders physically, emotionally and/or financially. A wide array of stakeholders are adversely affected by a crisis including community members, employees, customers, suppliers and stockholders.”

Although crisis communication theory is still evolving, we turn to Marsen’s (2020) overview to highlight some focal points. First, there are
several variations in crisis communication’s research parameters. The crises in which communications are investigated can be termed as preventable or not preventable, and can be categorized as organizationally external, internal, or both. Further categorizations include identifications of performance, moral, attack, or disaster crises. In addition, investigative boundaries range from communications that manage, prepare for, and prevent organizational crises (Coombs, 2007, 2010, 2015; Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005; K. M. Hearit, 1995; Marsen, 2020; Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008).

Marsen’s (2020) synthesis guides our discussion of four leading crisis communication theories, starting with image repair theory (IRT) (Benoit, 1997, 2018). This theory incorporates rhetorical apologia (K. M. Hearit, 1995) and targets organizational image preservation/enhancement as the prime objective of crisis communication. IRT puts forth five potential organizational crisis response strategies: (1) Denial and its counterpart, mortification (acceptance of total blame), (2) Placing the responsibility for the crisis on others or on accidental causes, (3) Reframing the crisis to reduce its perceived gravity, (4) Refusing to assume responsibility, and (5) Engaging in damage reparations, including prevention of similar future crises. An astute example of image repair theory in action can be found in a case study about the London Whale crisis (K. M. Hearit & Hearit, in press).

IRT approaches crises from a managerial viewpoint. In contrast, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007, 2015) asserts that an organization should crisis communicate with a strategy that reflects its appropriate level of responsibility. Reputational mending with stakeholders is paramount. And such reparations must equal the public’s attributions. SCCT reconfigures IRT’s five organizational crisis communication strategies into four “postures”: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering (Coombs, 2014; Marsen, 2020).

Compared to IRT and SCCT, discourse renewal theory (DRT) is more forward oriented. Discourse renewal theory focuses on crisis communication strategies that construct a more positive future organizational vision and identification (Marsen, 2020; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2017). DRT attempts to reposition a crisis as a future opportunity. Lastly, rhetorical arena theory contends that organizational reputation can improve after a crisis occurs by incorporating the voices of diverse stakeholders in crisis communication (Johansen & Frandsen, 2005; Marsen, 2020; Raupp, 2019).
In closing, crisis communication theory is transformative to the field of business communication because it is multi-disciplinary, multi-methodological, and speaks to the world of managerial practice. The foundations of crisis communication theory derive from rhetoric, public relations, organizational communication, management, and organizational behavior among others. Furthermore, methodological approaches include discourse analysis, quantitative surveys, and experimental designs. Finally, new crisis communication research questions continually arise as a result of our dynamic and complex organizational environment.

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