

Effects of National Identity in Transnational Crises: Implications of Social Identity Theory for Attribution and Crisis Communications

JONATHAN BORDEN¹
Syracuse University, USA

This study addresses the current gap in international crisis communications literature by introducing principles of social identity theory into the existing body of crisis communications theory. Hypotheses were tested via an experimental examination of attribution, feelings of empathy, and organization evaluation in several scenarios. Analysis revealed that organizational nationality can offer some level of reputational protection but crisis location does not.

Keywords: crisis communications, international crisis, situational crisis communication theory, SCCT, attribution bias, fundamental attribution error, social identity, reputation management

In an increasingly global marketplace, organizations rely on an international community of partners and clients for success in all aspects of their operations. The breakdown of traditional barriers to international trade has opened a new era of opportunity for organizations seeking to shrink overhead or to reach new groups of potential consumers. Although globalization has created new opportunities for organizations and industries, it has created new risks as well.

In particular, organizations operating across international borders may find themselves exposed to a unique set of crisis risks for which existing crisis management and crisis communications models have poorly prepared them. An American-owned company may experience crisis at an Asian manufacturing subsidiary which now threatens sales in Europe. A European dairy conglomerate may face boycotts in the Middle East following the publication of offensive cartoons in a Danish newspaper. A chaotic game of finger pointing between an embattled company and its international manufacturing partner may confuse publics and maintain a sense of crisis for those affected by a massive recall of lead paint-tainted toys. The failure of a safety valve at a facility belonging to a U.S. chemical manufacturer may claim the lives of thousands of citizens half a world away from the home office, generating damage to the health of affected locals and to the reputation of the responsible organization that can last for decades.

Jonathan Borden: jborden@syr.edu

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Although each of these situations has affected organizations, few studies in the crisis management literature seek to understand the international dynamics of crisis situations (Coombs, 2010). Most current crisis management research largely fails to address potential complications of the growing internationalism on existing models of crisis management and crisis communications. In particular, the bulk of existing crisis communications research has examined situations in which both crisis-affected organizations and crisis-affected stakeholders have shared a common nationality (Molleda & Laskin, 2005). Multinational crises—that is, crises affecting stakeholders and organizations of differing nationalities—remain relatively unexplored by existing crisis research.

This study aims to address this gap. It is proposed here that the integration of social identity theory within existing frameworks of crisis communications—most notably situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002)—may shed light on international crises. Specifically, SCCT's reliance on Weiner's attribution theory provides a useful location for the synthesis of the two fields into a more adept approach toward international crisis communications. This study uses an experimental approach to examine the possible effects of social identity theory on international crisis communications.

It is hypothesized that social identity-based processes may impact stakeholder reactions to crisis. Fundamental attribution error may lead to differential attribution and attitudes based on in-group/out-group dynamics between stakeholders and the organization. This study uses organizational nationality, crisis location, and identity mutability to examine stakeholder processing of incoming crisis information as well as the effect of identity-based information processing on attribution of crisis responsibility. It is hoped that these findings will advance the growing body of crisis communications literature and provide a better understanding of the role of identity as a factor in attribution. These findings may provide crisis communicators with more accurate models of attribution processes and more effective response strategies to crises in the global marketplace.

Literature Review

Rather than defining crisis as a specific event or set of events, crisis literature defines a crisis in terms of its impacts. Weick (1988) defines crises as "low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of the organization" (p. 305). This definition informs most contemporary definitions by emphasizing three characteristics. First, crises are low probability in that they are irregular and unpredictable. Second, crises are high consequence in that they pose significant harm or threat to the conduct of organizational business. Finally, the threat crises pose for an organization's fundamental goals may take any number of forms; what is significant is that a crisis constitutes an interruption of expected organizational outcomes. Echoes of Weick's definition can be heard in many contemporary crisis definitions (Jaques, 2007; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

In contemporary crisis communications theory, crisis lies not only in the triggering mechanism but in the processes of stakeholder reevaluations of their relationships with the organization. This point is interwoven with the crisis-as-event definitions. For example, Roux-Dufort and Metais (1999) state that a crisis is "a process of destabilization and a harsh and critical reevaluation of operational modes, control mechanisms, and basic assumptions of organizations, communities, or nations" (p. 114). Crisis

communications seek to manage this process of reevaluation and to assure stakeholders that trust in the organization is not misplaced, thus returning relationships to functionality, if not normalcy.

Crisis Communications

Situational crisis communication theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and its frameworks for crisis diagnosis and response strategy have situated crisis communications within a larger family of social-psychological theory. At its core, SCCT first argues that crises represent threats to organizational reputation, thus furthering the threat to "the most fundamental goals of the organization" (Weick, 1988, p. 305) by undermining relationships with stakeholders. Second, SCCT argues that effective crisis communications can mitigate the reputational damage inflicted by the crisis event. The most effective strategy for these communications varies from crisis to crisis. "SCCT posits that by understanding the crisis situation, the crisis manager can determine which crisis response strategy or strategies will maximize reputational protection" (Coombs, 2007b, p. 166). Third, the level of reputational threat and optimum crisis response strategy can be predicted via three crisis variables: crisis history, prior relational reputation, and initial crisis responsibility.

SCCT emphasizes the role of initial crisis responsibility as the key to tailoring messaging. This relationship of initial crisis responsibility with effective crisis communications has driven SCCT theorists to develop and rely on a typology of crisis types contingent on perceptions of initial responsibility referred to as *attribution*. SCCT uses an attribution scale that breaks down stakeholder perceptions of crisis responsibility into three distinct levels or crisis "clusters" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002): victim, accidental, and preventable. Attribution of responsibility is lowest in the victim cluster, moderate in the accidental, and highest in the preventable cluster.

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of this crisis cluster approach across myriad crisis situations in several organizational types, including governmental (Schultz & Raupp, 2010), nonprofit organizations (Wright, 2009), new media related (Oyer, 2010), bankruptcies (Cooley & Cooley, 2011), and complex crisis environments (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

Although the output of SCCT rests on these crisis clusters, the clusters themselves are constructed from the three core attribution variables hypothesized by Weiner's attribution theory (Weiner, 1985, 1986; Weiner, Amirkhan, Folkes, & Verette, 1987): stability, locus of control, and controllability.

Stability describes the frequency with which a crisis may occur or the likelihood of the crisis occurring again. Highly stable crises imply a shortcoming in the operational methods of the affected organization and amplify perceptions of organizational responsibility among stakeholders. Locus refers to the location of the power to control the crisis event. A crisis with an internal locus is one that can be controlled by the affected organization. An external locus shifts control outside of the organization. Controllability deals with the question of whether an event can be controlled at all. Low controllability denotes uncontrollability and thus mitigates the culpability of the affected organization (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

These are the three factors immediately connected to a crisis event, and thus the three factors most likely to dictate crisis-response strategies. Crisis managers seldom have the authority or the history to affect change in an organization's crisis history or prior relational reputation. Frequently, in fact, these factors are considered under the aegis of "issues management" (Coombs, 2010; Jaques, 2007)—an approach that integrates both strategic and tactical elements (Jaques, 2007). From the tactical perspectives of crisis management, the three attribution variables—stability, locus, and controllability—are the factors that dictate immediate conditions on the ground and thus have naturally become the crux of situational crisis communications research.

Weiner's Attribution Theory

The foundations of SCCT are deeply interwoven with Weiner's attribution theory (Coombs 2007a; Weiner, 1985, 1986; Weiner et al., 1987). Specifically, SCCT's three components of initial crisis responsibility—stability, locus, and controllability—are derived from Weiner's theory. According to Weiner's attribution theory, these three variables roughly predict the ways in which and the levels to which an individual assigns blame to another for a negative event. Weiner's attribution theory, however, is not directly framed by these variables; rather, it sees them as secondary to the psychological needs of the observer. For Weiner, much as for Heider before, psychological needs for positive self-image drive self-serving attribution bias (Heider, 1944, 1958; Kunda, 1990; Weiner et al., 1987).

Weiner's triptych of crisis variables—stability, locus, and controllability—were partially dictated by situational variables but were also participants' attempts to absolve themselves for negative events. Stability, locus, and controllability were not descriptors per se but were attempts at rationalization. These variables are not observational and objective but subjective and tailored to maintain the self-concept (Weiner et al., 1987).

The relationship of ego and attribution of responsibility for events is well documented. Heider (1944) observed that,

There exist tendencies to perceive ourselves or other persons in a certain way, and these tendencies affect origin attribution. The tendency to keep the ego level high is an example . . . subjects frequently tried to clear themselves of the responsibility for failures. (p. 368)

This tendency for biased, ego-protective attribution has been documented through considerable experimentation. To paraphrase from the conclusions of Fishbein and Ajzen (1973), psychological mitigation of attribution of responsibility is underdeveloped when attribution is treated as the natural outcome of fixed situational variables rather than as a process dictated by psychological needs. That is, the presumption that stability, locus, and controllability are fixed and dictated by objective reality as opposed to resulting from internal, motivated processes designed to maintain positive self-image neglects the underlying psychology of attribution.

These ego-protective roots for attribution, however, may not be limited to the self. Indeed, the social identity approach posits that the self-concept and ego are themselves interconnected with the individual's sense of social belonging and group membership. This relationship between the ego and the social group suggests that cognitive biases to minimize responsibility for a negative event may extend to members of the observer's social group (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997).

Social Identity Theory

The application of the principles of social identity (Tajfel, 1974) sheds light on the relationship of individuals with their social groups, the need for individuals to maintain the high opinion of peers, and the effects of attribution bias on stakeholder assessment of organizational crisis responsibility. The crux of social identity theory is that an individual's self-worth is informed by evaluations of his or her social group. For the individual to retain a positive self-concept, a positive concept of the group is necessary. This may extend the function of ego-protective bias to other members of the reference group. Hornsey (2008) argues,

If we are to accept that people are motivated to have a positive self-concept, it flows naturally that people should be motivated to think of their groups as good groups . . . striving for a positive social identity, group members are motivated to think and act in ways that achieve or maintain a positive distinctiveness between one's own group and relevant outgroups. (p. 207)

It has further been argued that organizations possess social identities that may trigger feelings of commonality among their stakeholders (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Hong & Yang, 2011; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Country-of-origin research has thoroughly documented that this is the case (Brijs, 2006; Noorderhaven & Harzing, 2003; Pereira, Hsu, & Kundu, 2005). In sum, research has unequivocally demonstrated that, even in a transnational system, stakeholders retain an awareness of an organization's home country and judge organizations based on this fact. By proxy, this suggests that in crises, this awareness informs stakeholder analyses of the crisis scenario and cognitive assessments of organizational responsibility.

Integrating ego-protective cognition in attribution with ego-bolstering cognition in in-group assessment, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: When stakeholders and the crisis-affected organization share a nationality, they will reveal lower levels of crisis responsibility attributions and more favorable attitudes toward the organization than when stakeholders and the crisis-affected organization do not share a nationality.

Research has further suggested several key areas in which social identity may become salient during crisis condition: self-categorization, depersonalization, and identity distancing. In general, empathy for victims is increased by a sense of connection with the victims (Clark, Oulette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981; Schoenrade, Batson, Brandt, & Loud, 1986). In the case of organizational crises, secondary stakeholders' (i.e., those only indirectly affected by the crisis event)

perceptions of connection with primary stakeholders (direct victims of the crisis) (Ulmer, 2001) may facilitate empathetic perceptions of self-victimization by the crisis-involved organization. Although these dynamics of social identity theory constitute potential attribution interrupters in their own right, the exploration of social identity effects on cognitive processing was further developed in Turner's expansion of social identity theory into an analysis of processes of self-categorization (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). The possibility that organizational crisis may incite such dynamics among stakeholders led to a second hypothesis:

H2: When stakeholders share a nationality with the direct victims of a crisis event, they will reveal higher levels of crisis responsibility attributions and less favorable attitudes toward the organization than when they do not share a nationality with the direct victims.

The research that adopts the social identity approach, however, acknowledges that social identities are fluid and can change shape or salience based on situational conditions (Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998; Spears et al., 1997). This fluidity is particularly acute in times of duress. These shifts in social identity salience can take several forms. Social psychologists have noted the phenomenon of deindividuation or depersonalization under conditions of collective threat or stress (McGarty, 1999). To paraphrase Turner (1985), during times of threat, people perceive themselves as emblems of the social group rather than as individuals. For example, in the era after 9/11, U.S. nationality, social identity, and subsequent sense of Americanness were significantly heightened in the United States (Li & Brewer, 2004). U.S. citizens intensified nationalistic and patriotic fervor in keeping with the self-stereotyping aspect of social identity salience (Skitka, 2005). More importantly, the case can be made that this intensification of the social identity intensified feelings of personal loss or violation in the wake of the incident, leading to a collective sense of victimization among U.S. citizens. Individuals felt personally violated by the attack, regardless of their direct connections to the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, or Flight 93 (Carillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2003). The individual identity was subsumed by the collective identity to such an extent that the collective loss was processed at an individual level.

Although 9/11 represents a unique case, similar dynamics may emerge in social identity-rooted attribution errors in alternative contexts such as organizational crises. Specifically, perceptions of the organization or the crisis victims as in-group/out-group members may interrupt attribution as proposed in the current situational crisis communication theory. When individuals see others like themselves suffer at the hands of others unlike themselves, they may perceive themselves to be empathetic victims of the violation.

Literature regarding the "ultimate attribution error" (Hewstone, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979) suggests that this process is not limited to perceptions of individual-level victimization; it also may affect assessments of blame in the wake of a disaster or crisis. The crux of this error lies in the notion that attribution and blame are assessed not simply based on *what* has occurred, as in Weiner's attribution theory, but also on *who* is involved. In short, assessments of responsibility vary according to whether the outcome is good or bad and whether the actor belongs to the in-group or out-group.

According to the ultimate attribution error, responsibility for negative acts is externalized for in-group actors. Intention and subsequent blame for the action is low, effectively insulating the in-group member from responsibility for the negatively perceived action (Hewstone, 1990). This process is inverted for out-group members. For out-group members, responsibility for negative actions is internalized, increasing the culpability of the out-group actor for the negative event (Pettigrew, 1979).

These overlapping concepts—depersonalization/deindividuation and the ultimate attribution error—are hypothesized to interact in the midst of organizational crisis. These interactions generate different levels of blame for organizations in crisis, depending on the organization's status as in-group/out-group member and the victim's status as in-group/out-group member. The proposed results of these interactions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical Taxonomy of Social Identity/Attribution Interactions and Blame.

Victim	Organization	
	In-group (self)	Out-group (other)
In-group (self)	Moderate blame	High blame
Out-group (other)	Low blame	Moderate blame

These interactions may partially explain how variables such as commitment and relationship mitigate reputational damage in the wake of crisis (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Park & Reber, 2011). Empirical evidence clearly suggests that stakeholder commitment and organization–public relationships can soften the reputational blow posed by crisis events—thus, the inclusion of relational history in Coombs' (2004) reputational damage model. This research reconsiders these observations as functions of social identities. This operationalization led to two additional hypotheses.

H3: When stakeholders share a nationality with a crisis-affected organization and not with crisis victims, they will reveal lower levels of crisis responsibility attributions and more favorable attitudes toward the organization than when they share the same nationality with crisis victims but not with a crisis-affected organization.

H4: When stakeholders are exposed to a crisis where both organizational nationality and crisis location are the same (e.g., a U.S. organization's crisis happens in the United States and a Chinese organization's crisis happens in China), they will perceive themselves as more similar to crisis victims than to the crisis-affected organization.

Method

Design and Procedure

This study proposes that factors related to nationality affect stakeholder assessments of and reactions to organizational crises. It is hypothesized that two components—crisis location and organizational nationality—may significantly affect stakeholder perceptions of crisis events. To test the relationships among organizational nationality, crisis location, and stakeholder responses, an identical news story was written, within which only the home location of the organization and the location of the crisis had been manipulated.

Given the location of the study as well as the relative salience of the two national identities, the United States and China were selected as the two manipulation variables. The study design did not include response messages, because the focus was on perceptions of initial crisis responsibility rather than reactions to crisis management. The manipulation of organizational nationality and crisis location yielded a two-by-two between-subjects design: two organizational nationalities (U.S. and Chinese) times two crisis locations (United States and China). To mitigate the influence of confounding variables, the sample was limited to a single nationality: U.S. citizens.

All participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. A fictitious company, "Niely Technologies," was used to prevent preexisting attitudes toward the organization. At the outset, participants were provided with a crisis news article. An accident-type crisis was used. The crisis news articles were the same except for the location of the crisis (China or the United States) and the nationality of the company involved the crisis (Chinese or U.S.). The length of all message stimuli was kept consistent across the conditions. After reading the crisis news article, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire including (1) manipulation checks of crisis location and organizational nationality, (2) attribution of crisis responsibility, (3) attitudes toward the organization, and (4) levels of identification with the company and levels of identification with the direct victims of the crisis.

Crisis Stimuli

An accident crisis type was used for the crisis news articles for several reasons. First, the accident-type crisis is situated in the middle of SCCT's crisis cluster typology. This means that stakeholder interpretation of an accident-type cluster has the broadest two-directional range of interpretations of crisis information.

In all four conditions, a fictitious news story regarding an explosion at a Niely Technologies-owned factory was circulated. The story was treated as "breaking" in that details regarding the cause of the leak were kept vague; however, it was made evident that external conditions such as natural disaster were not to blame.

Participants

Participants were drawn from the student body at a university in the southeastern United States. Research suggests that students are an optimum stakeholder group in the technological sector. According to a Pew Research Center (2014) survey, 98% of respondents between ages 18 and 29 reported ownership of cell phones in 2014, the highest saturation of any age demographic. Research has further suggested that college students are among the heaviest users of cell phones, reporting from 8 to 10 hours on a cell phone per day (Roberts, Honore Petnji Yaya, & Manolis, 2014). Combined, these figures paint a picture of students and their age demographic as a key stakeholder group for technology companies.

Response levels were high, and final data cleaning yielded 213 participants. The average age of participants was 20.09 ($SD = 1.26$). Most of the participants were women (159, 74.6%); 53 (24.9%) of the participants were men. Assignment of participants into one of the four conditions was conducted through an "equal randomization" feature in the survey software. On average, 53 participants were exposed to one of the conditions. See Table 2 for the number of participants in each cell.

Table 2. Numbers of Participants in the Experimental Cells.

		Location		Total
		United States	China	
Nationality	U.S.	52	52	104
	Chinese	55	54	109
Total		107	106	213

Measurement

Manipulation checks for the study were based on recognition of the location of the crisis, the nationality of the organization in the crisis, and recognition of the organization name. The manipulation check for location was: (1) This crisis occurred in the United States. (2) This crisis occurred in the People's Republic of China. The manipulation check for organizational nationality was: (1) The organization involved in this crisis is from the United States. (2) "The organization involved in this crisis is from the People's Republic of China. The measures adopted a binary yes/no structure. Participants who failed to accurately answer the manipulation questions were redirected back to the article and were allowed to try again. Participants were allowed to advance to the main study only after they provided successful responses to the questions.

Attribution of Responsibility (Blame)

For the attribution of responsibility measures, a four-item attribution scale was implemented (Kim, 2011; Kim & Sung, 2014; Klein & Dawar, 2004). Participants selected their level of agreement with four statements: (1) The company is highly responsible for the crisis. (2) The company should be accountable. (3) The crisis is the fault of the company. (4) I blame the company for the crisis (Kim &

Sung, 2014, p. 68). For each statement, participants selected a response from a 7-point Likert scale anchored at 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*.

Level of Identification with the Organization

The second dependent variable, level of identification, was measured using a modified version of the visual overlap scale (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). The scale measures perceptions of commonality between the participant and a given attitude-object. For this study, identification was operationalized as empathy, or a feeling of shared suffering or sadness with those directly affected by the crisis. The construct was measured with a single item: How closely do you empathize with Niely Technologies, the company affected by this crisis? Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = *I do not empathize at all* and 7 = *I strongly empathize*.

Level of Identification with the Employees

Again, the construct was measured with a single item: How closely do you empathize with the employees of Niely Technologies harmed by this crisis? Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = *I do not empathize at all* and 7 = *I strongly empathize*.

Organization Evaluation (Attitude)

Stakeholder attitudes regarding the crisis-affected organization were measured utilizing a five-item company evaluation scale (Kim, 2011). Each item on the scale contained a brief sentence describing the stakeholders' perception of the organization: (1) I think this company is attractive. (2) I think this company is reliable. (3) I think this company is trustworthy. (4) I like this company. (5) My overall impression about the company is favorable (Kim, 2011, p. 228). Each item on the scale was measured via a 7-point Likert scale bracketed at 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*.

Results

Preliminary analysis of the data was conducted to confirm the reliability of the measures used for hypothesis testing. Both attribution ($\alpha = .87$) and evaluation ($\alpha = .95$) scales met Nunnally's (1978) threshold for scale reliability via Cronbach's α ($> .7$).

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 proposed that when stakeholders and the crisis-affected organization share a nationality, attribution of crisis responsibility will be lower than when stakeholders and the crisis-affected organization do not share a nationality. For the analysis, the four scale items used to measure attribution (responsible, accountable, fault, blame) were collapsed into a composite attribution mean item.

Two-way analysis of variance conducted on the data revealed that nationality indeed played a significant role in the level of stakeholder attribution of organizational crisis responsibility ($F(1, 211) =$

9.71, $p = .002$). Analysis revealed that when the organizational nationality was U.S. ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.18$, $N = 104$), U.S. participants attributed lower crisis responsibility than when the organizational nationality was Chinese ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.06$, $N = 109$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that when stakeholders share a nationality with the direct victims of a crisis event (i.e., location is the United States), they will reveal higher levels of crisis responsibility attributions and less favorable attitudes toward the organization than when they do not share a nationality with the direct victims (i.e., Chinese location conditions). Two-way analysis of variance tests were conducted to test Hypothesis 2. Contrary to the prediction, location did not affect U.S. participants' attribution of crisis responsibility ($F(1, 209) = 0.24$, $p = .878$) or their attitudes toward the organization ($F(1, 209) = 0.16$, $p = .687$). See Table 3 for means and standard deviations for the dependent variables. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 posited that when stakeholders share a nationality with a crisis-affected organization and not with crisis victims (i.e., U.S. company/Chinese location), they will reveal lower levels of crisis responsibility attributions and more favorable attitudes toward the organization than when they share the same nationality with crisis victims (i.e., U.S. company/U.S. location) but not with a crisis-affected organization. *T* tests were conducted on the attribution mean and evaluation mean variables. Attribution means between the two conditions varied significantly with the U.S.-based organization ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.87$), considered significantly less responsible than the Chinese-based organization ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.17$) ($t(51) = -2.529$, $p < 0.05$). Conversely, whereas the mean of the organization evaluation in the U.S.-based conditions ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.78$) was higher than that of the China-based conditions ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.02$), *t* testing revealed no significance in the difference ($t(51) = 1.46$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was only partially supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that when stakeholders are exposed to a crisis where both organizational nationality and crisis location are the same (i.e., a U.S. organization's crisis happens in the United States and a Chinese organization's crisis happens in China), they will be more empathetic to crisis victims than to the crisis-affected organization. Preliminary analysis revealed that, under all conditions, participants reported significantly higher levels of empathy for employees affected by the crisis rather than for the affected organization. Specifically for Hypothesis 4, however, the U.S. nationality/U.S. location condition yielded slightly lower ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.78$) feelings of empathy for the company than did the Chinese nationality/Chinese location condition ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.87$). Both conditions yielded significantly higher empathy responses for employees than for the company (U.S./U.S. $M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.60$; Chinese/Chinese $M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.26$). Repeated-measures analysis revealed a significant variance in the respective means ($F(1, 212) = 325.13$, $p < 0.01$; Wilks' $\lambda = 0.4$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.61$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

To compare the findings, Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of all dependent variables across the four experimental conditions.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables.

Independent Variables		Dependent Variables			
Nationality	Location	Attribution	Attitude (evaluation)	Empathy toward organization	Empathy toward employees
		<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
U.S.	United States	4.86 (1.44)	3.23 (1.05)	6.08 (1.60)	3.42 (1.78)
	China	4.83 (.86)	3.38 (.77)	6.12 (1.32)	3.81 (1.32)
	Total	4.84 (1.18)	3.31 (.92)	6.10 (1.46)	3.62 (1.57)
Chinese	United States	5.36 (1.18)	3.06 (1.06)	6.27 (1.32)	3.51 (1.78)
	China	5.28 (.93)	2.79 (1.07)	6.22 (1.20)	3.43 (1.87)
	Total	5.32 (1.06)	2.93 (1.07)	6.25 (1.26)	3.47 (1.82)

Discussion and Implications

Although the results of this research were mixed, they point to several areas where social identity may shed light on the field of crisis communications. They are discussed here in the order in which they were analyzed: attribution, empathy, and evaluation. Within each metric, examination will focus on the three areas of effect hypothesized and examined: nationality effect, location effect, and identity effect.

Attribution

This research finds that levels of attribution may be altered by the dynamics of identity. Although the nationality of the crisis-affected organization may insulate the organization from crisis responsibility, the location of the crisis will not. The following discussion examines the impacts of nationality, location, and identity on the levels of attribution measured in this research as well as their implications for crisis managers.

The results of this study support the hypothesis that attribution is significantly affected by the nationality of the crisis-affected company. Specifically, in the contexts explored here (U.S. company/U.S. participants), shared nationality between the organization and its stakeholders provides some insulation from crisis responsibility attribution for crisis-affected organizations. This finding may indicate that, although organizations may be exposed to some reputational risk due to international crises, reputational damage among domestic stakeholders may be less than damage among international stakeholders.

From a theoretical perspective, these results suggest that situational crisis communication theory may benefit from the integration of social identity as a component of the attribution stage before being applied to international crises. Specifically, although the crisis information that stakeholders receive may be similar, international stakeholder interpretations of that information, in terms of assessing organizational crisis responsibility, may be significantly different than those of domestic stakeholders.

For the practitioner, these variances indicate the need for greater nuance in international crisis management. Although no hard and fast rules dictate the attribution levels that frame the victim, accidental, and preventable clusters of SCCT, it is conceivable that the variations in attribution discovered here may either: (1) enable crisis managers to adopt a softer posture when dealing with crises among domestic stakeholders or (2) necessitate that crisis managers employ stronger response strategies when dealing with crises among international stakeholders. That is, under certain conditions, crisis managers may need to recognize and appropriately respond to divergent perceptions of organizational crisis responsibility in the domestic and international marketplaces.

Although the strong impact of nationality suggests that crisis managers consider national identity as a factor when addressing stakeholders, the very weak effect of location indicates that managers should not rely on geographical distance to insulate their organization from crisis damage. The evidence did reveal slightly higher attribution in the U.S. location conditions for both the U.S.- and China-based organization conditions, but the effect was minimal. Thus, distance from the crisis may offer no reputational protection for crisis-affected organizations.

This finding is consistent with the nascent body of cross-national conflict shifting theory (Lim & Molleda, 2009; Molleda, Connolly-Ahearn, & Quinn, 2005; Molleda & Quinn, 2003). In keeping with the proposals of this paradigm, the findings here suggest that, although organizational nationality may mitigate the reputational damage of organizational crisis, geographic distance from the crisis incident to the stakeholder may not (Bravo, Molleda, Giraldo, & Botero, 2013). If a crisis occurring anywhere becomes salient, it may threaten organizational reputation nearly as much as if it occurred within the stakeholders' nation. In other words, crisis events anywhere may threaten organizational reputation everywhere, without consideration of geographical or national distance between the stakeholders and the event. This suggests that in the global marketplace, crisis managers must engage in constant environmental scanning in all areas of organizational operation, and they must be prepared to engage in crisis response to events that occur at any location of operation in all other areas of operation. Distance may offer no reputational protection for the crisis-affected organization.

The results of this study validate the claim that identity may affect attribution of organizational responsibility, but in some ways that were unpredicted at the outset of the analysis. The evidence suggests that national identity offers some shielding of organizations from responsibility among domestic stakeholders. This shielding by the aegis of group membership may merit consideration from crisis managers in their crisis management plans as they tailor response strategies for domestic and international publics. Although nationality protected reputation, geographic distance did not. Shared identity between organization and stakeholder may mitigate reputational damage, but the findings of this

research suggest that in-group/out-group differences between stakeholders and direct victims offer no reputational protection.

Empathy

Responses on empathy in many ways mirrored those in attribution, but with several critical distinctions. Empathy was measured in two ways: empathy toward the company and empathy toward the crisis victims (employees). Given the nuances between the two, each merits discussion here. Although the only statistically significant variances in empathy came between empathy for the company and empathy for the employees, several unexpected trends in the data merit further discussion.

Unlike attribution, dynamics within the empathy measure reveal several unique trends that merit the discussion of both their national and location conditions concurrently. As expected, empathy toward the company peaked among the domestic organization conditions. On the whole, participants expressed the most empathy for the U.S.-based company. This dynamic is arguably inverted by the fact that empathy for the victims (employees) is slightly lower in the same (U.S. organization nationality) conditions. Intriguingly, however, the directionality of these measures reveals some unique facets of empathy in crisis conditions.

In both nationality conditions, empathy toward the company is lower when nationality and crisis location are shared and higher when the two differ. That is, empathy toward the U.S.-based company is higher when the location is in China, and empathy toward the China-based company is higher when the location is in the United States. This trend is inverted in the measures of empathy toward employees. Empathy toward the employees is higher when the organization nationality and crisis location differ, and it is lower when they are the same.

These trends suggest two conflicting factors in stakeholder feelings of empathy for parties affected by crisis. First, overall, it is again observed that organizational nationality may be a primary factor in perceptions of empathy, both for the organization and the employees affected by crisis. The primary driver of stakeholder empathy may be organizational nationality, and feelings of empathy may be implicit expressions of support for the organization among its domestic publics rather than international publics. This is echoed in part by the reduction of empathy for employees under the same conditions (for domestic organizations, empathy for the organization increases as empathy for the employees decreases).

However, variances across the nationality/location conditions suggest that perceptions of empathy are influenced by the social identity relationship between the organization and its affected employees more than by the relationship between the observer/stakeholder and either group. In other words, when a self/other binary is detected between the organization and the affected employees, empathy manifests differently than when both parties are perceived to be members of the same social group. This unexpected relationship suggests some potential areas for future research, but the current data are insufficient to proffer significant conclusions.

Evaluation

In many ways, results in the evaluations metrics constitute a point of convergence between the findings in attribution and those of empathy. Although company evaluation reflects the impact of national identity found in the attribution measurement, it also retains some of the location-related complexity uncovered in the empathy measures. The U.S. nationality conditions registered higher evaluation scores, but the location conditions paint a more complex picture of organizational evaluation. For this reason, nationality and location will be discussed together.

The results of this study indicate that organizational national identity plays a decisive role in shaping stakeholder evaluations of the company. Participants evaluated the U.S.-based organization significantly more highly than the China-based organization regardless of crisis location. This suggests, once again, that even in the midst of crisis, organizations may be playing with a home field advantage when it comes to surviving crises in their domestic markets, regardless of the location of the crisis event. Intriguingly, though, the results also suggest that domestic locations may actually aid international organizations in weathering crises. Under the Chinese-nationality condition, the U.S.-location evaluation was higher than that of the Chinese-location evaluation, even in the wake of crisis. Once again, this suggests that the relationships of nationality and crisis location with stakeholder evaluation of the crisis-affected organization are more complex than simple identity binaries, such as nationality, would cause.

Although the evaluation results suggest a complex picture of postcrisis organization evaluation, the motivations behind such evaluations may be rather simpler. Theory suggests that in times of crisis, social groups can be tightened in mutual support as they engage in the recovery process; this can be considered a moderate form of the depersonalization principle of social categorization. In both the empathy and evaluation measures, participants expressed higher levels of empathy and higher levels of organizational evaluation in the Chinese-nationality, U.S.-location conditions than in the Chinese nationality, Chinese-location conditions. It is plausible that the partnership symbolized by the implicit decision of a China-based organization to operate at a U.S. location is emphasized in crisis conditions, thus underlining the connection of the two communities and therefore allowing the organization to slip (at least in part) under the group-protective, emotional umbrella formed by the crisis event's impact on the social group.

These overlaps of identity and the complexity of stakeholder reactions to crisis events, particularly on the event location variable, illustrate the complexity of integrating the tenets of social identity with attribution and situational crisis communication theory.

Limitations

As a preliminary study examining the relationships of social identity with situational crisis communication theory, several limitations may affect the theory development potential of this research. Although social identity is a key factor in the way individuals perceive themselves and the world around them, its complexity is a key limitation in its applicability to research. For the purposes of parsimony, this study chose to operationalize social identity narrowly along lines of nationality. In practice, however, social

identity is much more complex. Social identity research emphasizes not a singular identity but rather multiple overlapping and occasionally competing social identities. While these identities may vary in salience based on a given situation, it is in their overlaps that they most effectively work to delineate the self. Gender, ethnicity, nationality, even political party and university affiliation are all forms of social identity, and the self theoretically manifests at their point of convergence.

Several methodological considerations should be noted regarding the generalizability of these findings. Experimental methods, while robust in internal validity, are fundamentally limited in external validity and generalizability. Furthermore, the unique demographics of the sample used here—most notably on age, gender, and education—are not representative of the general population. The overrepresentation of women in the sample is particularly noteworthy, because some research suggests that gender is a factor in risk and crisis perception (Davidson & Freudentberg, 1996). Additionally, because participants in this research were of a single nationality (U.S.), further research is necessary to determine whether the findings are applicable in non-U.S. contexts. This research presents a preliminary exploration of the implications of the social identity approach for crisis communications, but future research is necessary to expand the results presented here.

Implications for Future Research

While crisis communications theories (such as the situational crisis communication theory) provide a framework, the results of this research suggest significant room for expansion of the current literature. As noted, social identity was operationalized here as nationality. In practice, though, social identities can incorporate myriad other traits. Although this research suggests nationality is a factor in crisis attribution, the effects of other variables remain to be explored. In addition, no manipulations dealt with organizational response. It remains to be seen whether perceptual gaps opened by the in-group/out-group dynamic could be bridged in an organizational choice of spokesperson or response strategy. Relying on an in-group representative for the organizational response may mitigate the negative effects of perceptual variances.

This study used a single crisis cluster: an accidental crisis. It is conceivable that the effects of in-group/out-group perceptual variances and the ultimate attribution error would be more pronounced if the crisis event were more stigmatized, such as in the case of a “preventable” crisis. The relative severity of the violation could further activate the desire to distance other in-group members from blame via attribution bias.

While crisis communications continues to mature as a field, this research suggests significant space in the research to expand the effects of perceptual biases on attribution and blame and the effects of these biases on optimal crisis response.

Conclusion

In a global marketplace, organizations increasingly rely on an international community of partners and clients for success in all aspects of their operations, and yet organizations operating across

international borders may find themselves exposed to a unique set of crisis risks for which existing crisis management and crisis communications models have poorly prepared them. The integration of principles derived from the social identity approach may assist crisis communicators and scholars in addressing this new, globalized crisis environment.

Perhaps most importantly, the results of this study suggest that the integration of social identity-sourced concepts may further both the field and practice of crisis communications in international settings. The research presented here constitutes an initial step toward the integration of social identity and situational crisis communications, but the results suggest that the interweaving of these two fields may be not only a fertile area for future research but a critical part of equipping and preparing crisis communicators to perform in the global marketplace. Although further analysis and development of the concepts presented in this article are necessary, a more complete understanding of these dynamics may be critical to organizational survival in an environment where organizations are increasingly exposed to the risks of international crisis, and healthy relationships with international stakeholders become ever more integral to organizational health.

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