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# An Introduction to Attributional Influences in Organizations

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Marie Dasborough, Paul Harvey and Mark J. Martinko

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and Mark J. Martinko<sup>3</sup>

As argued by Fritz Heider back in 1958, individuals have an innate desire to understand the causes of important events in their lives. Heider's work marks the birth of attribution theory, which is the study of causal perceptions and their influence on behaviors. Since Heider's book was published a half century ago, a substantial body of research has developed that examines the role of attributions. This work has generated a number of journal articles that have been highly cited over the years. For example, a Google Scholar search conducted during April 2011 found that the attribution article by Kelley (1973) has been cited over 2000 times and a more recent article by Weiner (1985) has been cited over 5000 times. However, most of these articles are within the field of psychology, and not within the organizational sciences.

Recently, Martinko, Harvey, and Douglas (2007) argued that, despite the volume of work in this area, attribution theory has been underutilized as an explanatory framework in the organizational sciences. One reason for this appears to be that criticisms of attribution theory (e.g., Lord & Smith, 1983; Mitchell, 1982) have been misinterpreted and overgeneralized. Nevertheless, a steady stream of attributional research has focused on organizational issues and a number of organizational scholars are actively engaged in attributional research. In 1995 and 2004, there were two scholarly conferences on attribution theory (see Martinko, 1995, 2004). The attendance at these conferences indicated that there is a strong contingent of organizational researchers that view attributional processes as important explanatory constructs for organizational behaviors. Also among the attendees were Terry Mitchell and Robert

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Lord who were supportive despite the concerns they expressed earlier about this line of research.

Within the organizational sciences, attribution theory has been utilized to explore a range of issues such as: organizational conflict (see Baron, 1988), empowerment (Campbell & Martinko, 1998), entitlement (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Harvey & Martinko, 2009), goal setting (Dossett & Greenberg, 1981), performance appraisal (Feldman, 1981; Knowlton & Mitchell, 1981; Wood, & Mitchell, 1981), charismatic leadership (Puffer, 1990), performance (Brockner & Guare, 1983; Knowlton & Ilgen, 1980), turnover (Harvey, Harris, & Martinko, 2008), authenticity (Harvey, Martinko, & Gardner, 2006), and leader-member relations (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002; Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko et al., 2007; Martinko & Gardner, 1987; Martinko, Moss, Douglas, & Borkowski, 2007). Most recently, attribution theory has been applied to team contexts (e.g. West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009), entrepreneurship (Sequiera, Carr, & Rasheed, 2009), and abusive supervision (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, In Press).

As we argued recently, there is still a lot of room left available to explore (Martinko, Harvey, & Dasborough, 2011). The above studies represent just the tip of the iceberg in the application of attribution theory to organizations. The impetus for this special issue was an Incubator article published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (Martinko, et al., 2011), where we argued that attribution theory is a rich theoretical foundation that has been underutilized in the organizational sciences. Attribution theory publications have garnered a great deal of interest and thousands of citations within the field of psychology, and we believe that this same level of scholarly impact is warranted in the organizational sciences.

## Overview of the Special Issue

Within this special issue, there are three empirical studies. In the first article, Bowler, Woehr, Wuensch, and McIntyre (2011) examine the impact of supervisor aggression on attributions for subordinate success and failure. They observed that supervisors who scored highly on a measure of aggression displayed important differences in their attributions for subordinate failure. In developing their arguments, Bowler et al. explicate the manner in which hostile attributional biases and other attributional tendencies can help to explain why aggressive supervisors might be more punitive than non-aggressive supervisors in their responses to subordinate failure.

Sue-Chan, Chen, and Lam's (2011) article examines the supervisor-subordinate dynamic from the other perspective, that of the subordinate. Sue-Chan et al.'s study extends the aforementioned research on attributions

and leader-member relations by examining the influence of LMX quality on subordinates' attributions concerning supervisor coaching behaviors. Their study provides unique insight into the potential influence of leader-member relations on the types of leader-focused attributions employees form, as well as the performance outcomes of these attributions.

Finally, Poposki's (2011) article applies attributional logic to the issue of work-family conflict. In this study, Poposki (2011) investigates the attributional reactions of employees experiencing work-family conflict. Consistent with past research concerning self-serving attributional tendencies, the results indicate that work-family conflict is frequently attributed to external factors. Interestingly, the study also indicated that victims of work-family conflict were biased toward attributing blame to their work demands as opposed to their family demands. We feel that this finding could be a useful starting point for additional research on the role of attributions in shaping both perceptions of and reactions to work-life conflict.

These contributions are followed by comments provided by the modern father of attribution theory, Bernard Weiner. In his essay, Weiner (2011) discusses attribution theory, or rather the field of study that shares the primary goal of understanding how humans use causal ascriptions to understand themselves, their environment, and their lives in the larger context of "grand" theories of motivation. Weiner argues that while attribution theory is not a "unified conceptual system", he notes that this common goal unites a community of scholars. Weiner further demonstrates the importance of attributional processes to the grand theories of motivation and evolution, noting that attributions are fundamentally involved in these theories of human behavior, and uses this argument to underscore the notion that "attribution theory therefore should (must) play a major role" in the field of organizational science.

For this special issue, we sought contributions from a variety of disciplines but primarily from the discipline of management. Ironically, the submissions we received for the special issue mostly came from people within the field of organizational psychology. This pattern of submissions reflects the pattern we noted above, suggesting that attribution theory and its applications are much better appreciated by academicians from psychology as opposed to those in the organizational sciences.

Further, of the manuscripts submitted from management scholars, many made the error of equating attributions with general perceptions. Many of the papers which were desk rejected made this mistake – the papers were not actually about attributions. Our advice for scholars in management who are not familiar with attribution theory is to start by reading the attribution theory classics – Kelley (1973) and Weiner (1986). Then, for those scholars

interested in leadership, follow this reading up with the article by Martinko et al. (2007). The need for organizational scholars to more fully understand the fundamentals of attribution theory is also pointed out in the concluding article in this issue by Bernard Weiner. In his article, he points out that the results of the articles that were published could have been enhanced by utilizing more of the dimensions of attributions and by linking those dimensions more clearly to both emotions and behaviors. Most importantly however, Weiner emphasizes that attributional analyses are at the core of organizational observations clearly inferring that a more sophisticated understanding and analysis of attributional processes would greatly benefit the organizational sciences.

Our hope for the future is to boost the contribution of attribution theory in management journals such as *Group & Organization Management*. This journal is an international forum for the latest research and analysis in organizational behavior, business strategy, organization theory, and human resources. The journal sheds new light on a variety of topics (listed from the GOM website), which are all influenced by attribution processes, including:

- Leadership – leader attributions for subordinate performance, subordinate perceptions of leaders (e.g. Ashkanasy & Gallois, 1994)
- Teamwork & Group Processes – team level attributions for performance (e.g. West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009)
- Multi-level Theory and Macro OB – attributions can be examined within the individual, between individuals, at the group level, and at the organizational level.
- Organizational Communication – attribution biases in corporate reports (e.g. Martinko et al., 2006).
- Strategic Management – attributions have been examined within the context of strategic decision making (e.g. Pearce & DeNisi, 1983).
- Cross-Cultural and International Management – individuals from different cultures make different types of attributions for outcomes (e.g. Kashima & Triandis, 1986).
- Organizational Cognition – clearly attributions are a cognitive process and tap into this domain of research.
- Workplace Diversity – organizational culture attributions are influenced by diversity of employees (e.g. Krackhardt & Kilduff, 1990).

In conclusion our objective in developing this special issue was to stimulate attribution research and make the readers of GOM more aware of the explanatory power of attribution theory. We view this issue as a

modest contribution to our knowledge of how attribution processes affect organizational life. We are hopeful that the articles and essays contained in this special issue are an effective impetus for research so that the explanatory power of attribution processes can be more fully realized.

### **Acknowledgement**

As guest co-editors for this special issue, we would like to offer our thanks to GOM Editor Yehuda Baruch for his guidance and support throughout the process of developing this issue. We also extend our appreciation to the reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions, and to the authors for submitting their scholarly contributions.

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## Bios

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**Mark J. Martinko** is the Bank of America Professor of Management at Florida State University. His research focuses on the role attribution processes in organizations and has been published in well-respected journals including: *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Group & Organization Studies*, and the *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*.