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Attribution theory in the organizational sciences: A case of unrealized potential

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The	**Attribution theory in the organizational**
Incubator	**sciences: A case of unrealized potential**

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Summary   We argue that although attributional processes appear to affect virtually all goal and reward oriented behavior in organizations, they have not received adequate attention in the organizational sciences. In this Incubator, we encourage scholars to unlock the potential of attribution theory to develop more complete explanations of organizational behavior. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Attribution processes have been underutilized in the organizational sciences, yet have tremendous potential to explain a wide range of workplace behaviors. The validity of attribution theory and the tools to measure attributional processes are well-documented and frequently used by social psychologists (Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006). We suspect that the underutilization of attribution theory in the organizational sciences may have originated from concerns raised in the early-1980s that cast attribution theory in an overly negative light. In this Incubator, we address those concerns and demonstrate that attributions are relevant to many organizational phenomena, with a particular emphasis on *attribution styles*, which are stable and reliable predictors of human behavior (e.g., Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007).

Definition, Role, and Function of Attributions

When we refer to attribution theory we are referring to the work of Heider (1958), Kelley (1973), and Weiner (1986), which defines attributions as individuals' explanations for the causes of their successes

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and failures. The basic premise is that people have an innate desire to understand the causes of important outcomes in their lives and that their attributions influence their responses to these outcomes (Heider, 1958). Typical attributional explanations for outcomes are ability, effort, the nature of the task, and luck.

Attributions are individuals' beliefs about the causes of their successes and failures (i.e., rewards and punishments) and influence expectancies, emotions, and behaviors (Martinko et al., 2007). Recognizing that behavior is influenced by rewards and punishments, as almost all organizational scholars would agree, and that attributions influence behaviors, it follows that the entire range of organizational behaviors that are influenced by rewards/punishments are also affected by attributions. Because rewards and punishments are important, individuals have a vested interest in knowing their causes.

In addition to attributions for specific events, recent research demonstrates that *attribution styles* are useful for understanding individual behaviors (see Martinko et al., 2007). Attribution styles are stable, trait-like tendencies to make certain types of attributions that affect behaviors across situations. Attribution styles can affect interpersonal relations and, as these relations unfold over time, the effects of styles become more pronounced. Thus, although a specific attribution may not predict relationship quality, the consistency with which a style manifests itself over time may have significant impacts on work relationships. Research indicates that attribution styles are related to perceptions of the quality of leader-member relations, victimization, aggression, entitlement, self-efficacy, and the perceived desirability of job candidates. There is also reason to believe that attribution styles are related to other outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior, justice, and burnout. Next, we discuss why attribution theory has been underutilized, and discuss areas where attribution processes can help address organizational research questions.

A Brief History of Attribution Theory in the Organizational Sciences

The importance of attributions and attribution styles is well recognized in psychology where significant journal space and sections of introductory texts are devoted to attribution processes. There is proportionately less journal space devoted to attribution topics in the organizational literature. To illustrate this disparity, we performed a search for the term ''attribution'' in the PsychARTICLES (psychology) and ScienceDirect (business) databases from 1995 to 2008. We found 279 articles in the PsychARTICLES database, but only 46 in the ScienceDirect database. Although this analysis probably underestimates the true volume of organizationally relevant attributional research—Martinko et al. (2006) cited almost 200 relevant publications and 33 attributional papers were presented at the 2009 Academy of Management conference—it illustrates the disparity between the two fields. Thus while attributions appear to be an integral part of explanations for behavior in psychology, they have played a lesser role in organizational sciences, suggesting that they are underutilized.

We believe that this lack of attention stems, at least in part, from two criticisms. These criticisms appeared when attribution theory was emerging and there were relatively few attribution scholars to address them. First, Mitchell (1982) argued that many factors influence leader behavior and that attributions account for only a small proportion of the variance in behaviors. We find Mitchell's criticism puzzling since he had already made this point when he introduced an attributional model of leader-member relations and began working in this area (Green & Mitchell, 1979). In response to this criticism, Martinko et al. (2007) examined a sample of research on antecedents of leader behavior and

found that the per cent of variance explained by attributions (ranging from 17 to 36 per cent) was comparable or superior to that explained by other factors such as charisma, political skill, and core self-evaluations (ranging from 5 to 18 per cent). It is also noteworthy that numerous studies have found consistent support for the notion that leaders' attributions explain a significant percentage of the variance in their attitudes and behaviors. For example, the Ashkanasy and Gallois (1994) study found that attributions accounted for 23–51 per cent of variance in leaders' evaluations of subordinates' performance.

We view the Mitchell (1982) criticism as unfair on two counts. First, as demonstrated by the aforementioned research, attributions do account for a significant proportion of the variance in leaders' behaviors as compared to other predictors. Second, we view the Mitchell criticism as a "straw man" argument in that, as far as we know, no one (except maybe Green and Mitchell) ever suggested that attributions accounted for more variance than any other predictor of leader behavior.

The second criticism is that attribution processes are not used on a routine basis because they are too cognitively demanding and are thus limited to highly significant or unusual events (Lord & Smith, 1983). An example of when this criticism applies is when an employee makes a snide remark. In this case, Lord and Smith would contend that supervisors are most likely to use a cognitive heuristic and react instantaneously without going through the rational attribution process before reacting. We agree, but also believe that the cognitive labor criticism is another "straw man" argument in that attribution theorists have never claimed that explicit attributions are made in everyday interactions. In contrast, attribution theorists have long recognized the issue of scope by consistently asserting that attribution processes are cued by unexpected, surprising, and important events (Weiner, 1986) as opposed to routine everyday situations. Thus, we see the cognitive labor criticism as recognition of a known boundary condition and not a flaw. Additionally, we highlight that attribution styles, which are heuristics that do not require laborious cognitive effort, are likely to influence a wide range of routine behaviors traditionally thought to fall outside the scope of attribution theory.

Areas for Attribution Theory Research

Leadership

The opportunities for relating attributions to leadership are extensive. Initial work on the Green and Mitchell (1979) model demonstrated that leaders' attributions for subordinate behaviors were related to disciplinary actions. Later, a series of studies by Ashkanasy and his colleagues (e.g., Ashkanasy & Gallois, 1994) essentially validated the Green and Mitchell (1979) model, confirming the predicted relationships between causal dimensions and leaders' attributions.

At least some of the failure to extend this area may be due to the criticisms described earlier. It may also be that because attribution theory is rooted in psychology, its application to leadership has not been obvious to leadership scholars. Additionally, the recent dominance of transformational leadership and LMX theories combined with a movement away from trait approaches has likely discouraged the use of attribution theory in this domain. It is notable, however, that the growth of research on characteristics related to attributions, such as core self-evaluations, may signal a new interest in trait-like variables.

Although we believe that exploring the effects of both leader and subordinate attributions for explicit events is warranted, there may be even greater potential in studying attribution styles. Recent research (e.g., Martinko et al., 2007) has demonstrated that incompatible attribution styles are related to members' perceptions of LMX quality. However, this research has only looked at two potential

attribution styles and, as demonstrated by Martinko (2002), when combining the stability and locus of causality dimensions, there are sixteen possible intrapersonal styles and sixteen interpersonal styles.

To illustrate the impact of just two of these styles, consider one leader with an interpersonal attribution style that favors internal, stable, and uncontrollable attributions (e.g., intelligence) and another who favors external, unstable, and controllable attributions (e.g., organizational policies) for the performance outcomes of employees. A leader with the former style is apt to assume employees "either have it or they don't" and spend little time nurturing a poor-performer. The second type of leader would tend to view the same employee's performance as a function of organizational procedures and try to change policies rather than holding the employee accountable. Thus, the attributional lens through which leaders diagnose and attempt to resolve performance issues may be significantly influenced by their attribution styles. Further complicating the issue is the fact that the employees have their own attribution styles that may conflict with those of their leaders. Thus, the knowledge and theory concerned with attribution styles provides unique insights into the causes of leader-member conflicts.

Another area for future research is the influence of subordinates' attributional styles on their evaluations of leaders. Research on leader phenomena such as abusive supervision and ethical leadership often treat subordinate ratings as objective indicators of these variables. We expect that biased attributions distort subordinates' perceptions of their leaders' behaviors. For example, when subordinates have self-serving attribution styles that dispose them to attribute negative outcomes to external factors, it is likely that they view legitimate criticisms from their supervisors as unfair. Similarly, we expect that these types of attribution styles may lead to perceptions of abusive and unethical leadership.

Collective attributions

A number of studies indicate that corporate reports demonstrate self-serving attribution biases (see Martinko et al., 2006). At the group level, it would seem that developing and testing theory to explain how groups develop attributions would be useful. Given the established power of group-level phenomena to influence the perceptions of group members, it is reasonable to expect that the group dynamic could shape the attributions of members. To explore this possibility, we suggest that research comparing the attribution styles of individuals within and outside the group context could be helpful in determining if group dynamics can alter a person's attributional tendencies. Specific group characteristics such as cohesiveness, diversity, and longevity might influence the development of a group-level attribution style and the likelihood that members would subjugate their own attributional tendencies to those of the group. Research in this area could help to answer questions about why groups engage in phenomena such as risky-shift and groupthink. For example, if groups systematically attribute failure to bad luck they might be inclined to repeat mistakes.

Attributions and attribution styles may contribute to group/team identification. Attribution styles have not been traditionally treated as a team-level construct. We argue, however, that they can and should be applied to the team level of analysis in keeping with the multi-level movements. West, Patera, and Carsten (2009) recently examined team optimism, conceptualized as an attribution and measured using explanatory styles. We believe this is another fruitful direction for empirical research.

Extending this idea, we suggest that the attributions team members make, individually or collectively, for the team's performance can influence the extent to which they identify with the team. For example, when a team succeeds and the members of the team attribute the success to the ability and effort of the team members, it is likely that they also feel a part of and identify with the team. On the other hand, when members are self-serving and take personal credit for team successes while blaming failures on their teammates, it seems less likely that a bond of loyalty and identification within and

among team members will develop. While the effects of these types of attributions on team identity and performance processes have not yet been formally tested, we believe that attributions have considerable potential for explaining team dynamics.

Conclusion

We believe that attributions are an integral part of the motivation process and play an important role in explaining virtually all reward-oriented behavior in organizations. The research suggestions presented here are only a small subset of the potential applications of attribution theory. We argue that attribution theory is not typically applied to organizational behavior, in part, as a result of early criticisms. These criticisms are inappropriate in the context of research focused on attribution styles and addressing situations and outcomes within the intended scope of attribution theory. Properly understood and applied in the correct context, attribution theory offers a wealth of explanatory possibilities, which we hope that scholars will explore. Comparing the widespread use of attribution theory in social psychology to its limited use by organizational scholars, we are drawn to one conclusion: when it comes to attribution theory, the organizational sciences have a lot of catching up to do.

Author biographies

Martinko is the Bank of America, Professor of Management at Florida State University where he has authored, co-authored, or edited eight books and numerous articles concerning attribution theory and leadership. He is an associate editor for the *Journal Organizational Behavior* and serves on the editorial boards four other journals.

Harvey is an assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of New Hampshire. He serves on the editorial boards for *Journal of Organizational Behavior* and *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*. His research publications have examined attributions, leadership, and abusive supervision.

Dasborough is an assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Miami. She currently serves on editorial boards for *Journal of Organizational Behavior, The Leadership Quarterly,* and the *ad hoc* review board for *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Her scholarly publications focus on the topics of leadership, attribution, and emotions.

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