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An Overview of the Special Issue on Attribution Theory Johnson Williams

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Abstract

To further advance attribution theory and its application to the area of organizational behavior, this special issue of the Journal of Organizational Behavior was established. In this introduction, we present a short overview of the reason for this special issue, a succinct assessment of the articles contained in it, a discussion about progress toward the aims of the field, and ideas for how future research might advance the area. In doing so, we detail how our knowledge of how attributional processes predict and explain people's emotions and actions has been improved by applying attribution theory to studies using a wide variety of study designs, research settings, and primary subjects. We also recommend ways to advance attribution theory so that it may more accurately represent interactions in a broad range of organizational settings.

KEYWORDS : attribution, leadership, motivation

INTRODUCTION

Individuals develop explanations (or causal ascriptions; Heider, 1958) for occurrences in their surroundings by using the framework provided by attribution theory. This attribution theory special issue was sparked by a confluence of events. To begin, it has been abundantly evident in recent journal papers that attribution theory has not had the impact in the field of organizational sciences that it is capable of. In particular, an article by Martinko, Harvey, and Dasborough (2011) noted that attributional perspectives on human behavior receive a disproportionately small amount of journal space in organizational behavior journals, despite receiving a significant amount of journal space in social psychology. They point out in that article that many academics have erroneously minimized the importance of attribution theory in their talks. Recent research by Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook, and Crook (2014) used a meta-analysis to rebut criticisms of attribution theory's explanatory power (Lord & Smith, 1983; Mitchell, 1982), showing that attributional constructs account for about as much variation in organizational outcomes as other popular constructs like organizational justice and organizational citizenship behaviors. The promise of attribution theory to help us better understand organizational behavior has not gone unmet, as shown by recent papers.

Recent contributions have been promising since they illustrate the relevance of attributional processes, despite the relative lack of contributions concentrating on attributional processes. Among these developments is an article by Chan and McAllister (2014) published in the *Academy of Management Review*, which uses attribution theory as a central explanation for employees' views of abusive management. The concept of relational attributions was also explained in an essay by Terry Mitchell and colleagues published in the *Academy of Management Review* (Eberly, Holley, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2011). Finally, Burton, Taylor, and Barber (2014) conducted an empirical test of internal, external, and relational attributions in subordinate/supervisory relationships in an article published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

Employee entitlement (Harvey, Harris, Gillis, & Martinko, 2014) and attribution processes as a process underlying ethical decisions (Harvey, Martinko, & Borkowski, 2017) have also emerged as important moderators between supervisory behavior and subordinates' reports of abusive supervision. An Australian Research Council grant (Ashkanasy, Bennett, & Martinko, 2014-2017) focuses on the consequences of high-performance work systems via the lens of attribution processes. A comparable role is played by attribution processes in a new book for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychologists' Frontier Series, which investigates the tipping point at which high-performance work systems are seen as abusive (Ashkanasy, Bennett, & Martinko, 2016). In conclusion, attribution theory's potential uses have broadened greatly in recent years. The goal of this themed issue is to facilitate discussion on how attributional processes might shed light on some of the most pressing problems in organizational dynamics. Two methods were used to generate the papers for this special issue. As usual, a call for papers was announced by the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. In addition, a call for papers was issued for the Third International Symposium on Attribution Theory, which was held in March 2018 at the School of Business and Industry at Florida A&M University. Previous symposia on attribution theory were held in 1994 and 2004.

Both were well attended and resulted in attribution theory papers published in books by St. Lucie Press (Martinko, 1995) and Information Age Publishing (Martinko, 2004). The 1995 book was cited by Shafritz and Ott (2001) as one of the two most important contributions to the organizational sciences in 1994.

There were 40 attendees at the Third International Symposium on Attribution Theory, which included scholars from 10 countries (i.e., Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Scotland, and the United States). Although presenting at the symposium was not a formal requirement for inclusion in this special issue, all of the papers included in this special issue were presented during the symposium. The symposium was intended to bring the worldwide community of attribution theory scholars together to share constructive developments in the attribution theory literature and identify opportunities to advance both theory and practice. All participants, including keynote speaker Bernard Weiner, were able to provide feedback on every presentation. All papers included in this special issue were also subject to the *Journal of Organizational Behavior's* standard review process. Ultimately, the study authors, feedback from the attendees of the Third International Symposium on Attribution Theory, and the excellent review team at the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* developed the five papers included in this special issue that advance our understanding of attribution theory.

1 | AN OVERVIEW OF THE PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

In the first paper, Sun, Liden, and Ouyang (2019) examine a moderated mediation model of the indirect effect of servant leadership on upward voice through gratitude and organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals, conditional upon relational attributions. Sun et al. tested their model with multisource data collected from 137 Chinese social workers and their leaders across three phases. Their study design utilized daily surveys for the mediators so they could use the experience sampling method to create novel insights about the dynamic natures of gratitude and organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals as mediators of the relationship between followers' perceptions of servant leadership and upward voice. Overall, Sun et al. found that followers who made higher levels of relational attributions experienced lower levels of gratitude, organizational citizenship behaviors toward individuals, and upward voice than followers who made lower levels of relational attributions. Sun et al.'s study is important because it highlights how relational attributions can have detrimental impacts on followers' perceptions of servant leadership, as well as followers' resultant affective and behavioral responses.

In the second paper, Carson (2019) makes a contribution to attribution theory by explaining why external relational attributions provide an important nuance to our understanding of relational attributions. Carson defines external relational attributions as attributional explanations that identify the cause of an outcome as the relationship between two people other than the focal individual making the attribution. Carson develops propositions that will facilitate future research efforts to empirically examine the impact of others' relationships on focal individuals' attributions and attributors' resultant relationship maintenance behaviors. Relational attributions is an emerging area of attribution theory, so Carson's paper is timely and important because it helps situate relational attributions within existing attribution theory principles and extends our understanding to account for how external relational attributions regarding others' relationships affect the attribution process.

In the third paper, Gardner, Karam, Tribble, and Cogliser (2019) examine how internal, external, and relational attributions across leaders and members differentially predict relationship work, self-work, and conflict within leader-member relationships. Gardner et al. make contributions by integrating attributional biases into our understanding of relational attributions, examining convergent and divergent attributions within leader-member relationships, and explicitly theorizing why relationship work, self-work, and conflict arise according to the combination of leaders' and followers' attributions. Gardner et al.'s study is important because it provides insight into the important roles of convergent and divergent attributions for outcomes across members of dyadic relationships.

In the fourth paper, Hewett, Shantz, and Mundy (2019) apply attribution theory to the human resource management context to examine the antecedents of employees' attributions about human resource management practices. Hewett et al. tested their model with multiwave data from 347 academic faculty working in the United Kingdom. Ultimately, their findings demonstrated that both fairness and cynicism had important implications for making attributions about various components of human resource management systems. Hewett et al.'s paper is important because it is one of the first to identify organizational policies as the target of attributions. Hewett et al. highlight the underutilization of attribution theory within the human resource management context and identify many new opportunities to advance our knowledge to a more macro level by exploring how organizations may be viewed as actors in attributional processes. In the fifth paper, Munyon, Jenkins, Crook, Edwards, and Harvey (2019) use a macro approach to studying attributions as they examine the firm-level consequences of product recalls. Like Hewett et al. (2019), Munyon et al. also view organizations as entities about which individuals make attributions.

Munyon et al. surveyed 320 working adults in the United States in an experiment that examined the attributions individuals made when product recalls were made.

The results revealed that consumers made stronger judgments of responsibility when defective products were insourced and/or when firms were negligent of the defect than when defective products were outsourced and/or firms were ignorant of the defective products until after consumer use. Munyon et al.'s findings are important because they demonstrate how studies can leverage attribution theory's explanatory power with experimental study designs and how attribution theory is applicable not only to the micro domain (i.e., individual level) but also within the macro domain (i.e., at the firm level). Altogether, these five papers extend attribution theory in numerous areas of critical importance, including micro contexts and macro contexts in organizational behavior, leadership, human resource management, and strategic management. The varying study designs used across Munyon et al.'s (2019), Hewett et al.'s (2019), and Sun et al.'s (2019) papers illuminate the myriad of opportunities to empirically examine attributions. Additionally, the cross-cultural findings from employee respondents in organizations located in China, Great Britain, and the United States show that attributions apply to a range of contexts. Further, Carson's (2019) and Gardner et al.'s (2019) conceptual papers highlight opportunities to provide nuanced insight into attributional dimensions and their application to contexts critical for understanding organizational behavior (e.g., leadership). Thus, the papers included in this special issue demonstrate some of the numerous opportunities available for scholars to investigate attribution theory from a wide range of research orientations. Overall, the five papers in this special issue provide novel insight into attribution theory that we hope will move the field forward.

2 | IMPRESSIONS, REFLECTIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The goal of the special issue, the symposium, and the prior two symposia was to further extend and adapt attribution theory and its application to the field of organizational behavior. As we consider the articles in the special issue, as well as the articles published in the two books from the prior symposia, it is clear that significant progress has been made regarding the application and generalizability of attribution theory to organizational contexts. In this special issue, attributional constructs are applied to and help explain servant leadership, the dynamics of leaders-member relations, how the relationships of coworkers affect organizational members, reactions of organizational members to human resource management practices, and consumer reactions to product recalls.

In the prior symposia, and in reviews of the general organizational behavior literature (e.g., Mackey et al., 2017; Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007), a wide variety of other applications have also been generated demonstrating the power of attribution theory to explain aspects of goal setting, abusive supervision, work attitudes, aggression, stress, conflict, group behavior, political behavior, organizational citizenship behavior, and emotions. Thus, significant progress has been made demonstrating the power of attribution theory to explain a wide variety of organizational phenomena. We expect further progress in many of these areas as the principles of attribution theory are generalized to explain the complex aspects of organizational behavior.

Significant progress has also been made in developing and adapting attribution theory to organizational contexts. In this special issue, three of the articles (Carson, 2019; Gardner et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019) focused on variations of relationship attributions. This focus appeared to be, in part, as a response to the recent conceptual and empirical work by Eberly and her colleagues (Eberly et al., 2011; Eberly, Holley, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2017). During the symposium, there was considerable debate as to whether or not the types of relational attributions described by Eberly et al. (2011, 2017) should be considered a new dimension or a causal explanation that can be related to the traditional dimensions described in the Kelley (1973) and Weiner (1985) models. This issue is important because the dimensions described by Kelley illuminate the types of information people use to make attributions, whereas the dimensions identified by Weiner help predict both behavioral and emotional responses. If relational attributions are considered causal explanations, then it increases the power and generalizability of this construct because it enables the explanations to be categorized along the dimensions of the Kelley and Weiner models that explain how these attributions are formed and their resultant effects on individuals' emotions and behaviors. It also enables these more specific areas of research to enhance the general theoretical tenants of attribution theory. A clear consensus was not reached during the symposium, so this is an issue that deserves further research attention. Another issue that emerged as a result of the development of this special issue was the level of understanding that was demonstrated regarding attribution theory. Many of the papers submitted for review failed to demonstrate knowledge of the basic tenets and principles that comprise attribution theory. As Weiner (1995) observed, there are many possible causal explanations for any outcome. Constructing a separate theory and body of research to explain every possible attributional explanation would be impossible. As a result, a classification system (i.e., causal dimensions) is necessary in order to develop a theory that can generalize across contexts and situations. Kelley's (1973) model describes the dimensions of information used to form attributions, whereas Weiner's (1985, 1986) model demonstrates how causal explanations can be classified into dimensions that predict both behavioral and emotional reactions.

These classification systems then allow researchers to understand how information is used to predict causal explanations and how highly divergent causal explanations can be generalized (i.e., placed into dimensions) to predict emotions and behaviors. The lack of appreciation and understanding of how attributions work resulted in many submissions that identified causal explanations but failed to demonstrate how information was used to develop these various explanations. This limitation restricted the description of how the various explanations related to emotions and behavior.

One of the key takeaways from the process of developing the special issue was a recognition of the need for researchers to be more mindful of the roots of their contributions so that their results can be generalized and contribute to both predicting and understanding emotions and behavior. Immediate and actionable opportunities for contributions to theory include the further development, validation, and evolution of attribution process models. A good starting place is with Kelley's (1973) and Weiner's (1985) seminal works, a synthesis of the Kelley and Weiner models provided by Martinko and Thomson (1998), and the early work that tested the validity of attributional models (Ashkanasy, 1989, 1995; Ashkanasy & Gallois, 1994; Mitchell & Wood, 1980). More can be done to directly test the validity of the current models in organizational contexts so we can extend attribution theory to more effectively predict and explain workplace behaviors.

We were also a bit concerned about the lack of progress in relating attributional processes to emotional processes. Although there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of emotions in leadership and organizational behavior (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002), we did not see this attention reflected in our submissions or in the recent literature. However, there are a few notable exceptions in the existing literature, particularly in the area of leader-member relations (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002, 2004; Martinko, Moss, Douglas, & Borkowski, 2007), abusive supervision (Brees, Mackey, Martinko, & Harvey, 2014; Chan & McAllister, 2014; Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002, 2004; Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011), deviant behavior (Harvey et al., 2017), and aggression (Douglas et al., 2008). Works by Weiner (1985, 1986, 2004, 2018) and the works cited above offer specific guidance on how particular types of attributions lead to specific emotions, including anger, shame, and gratitude. Again, more can be done here to understand how attributional processes influence emotions and the behaviors associated with those emotions in organizations.

Finally, some comment regarding the future of attribution theory in the organizational sciences is warranted. As Weiner (2018) observed, attribution theory is not simply a naïve or “grandmother” psychology. It has resulted in findings that generalize, are replicable, and explain many aspects of human motivation and emotion. From an organizational perspective, the analysis of causation is fundamental to understanding both success (i.e., reinforcement) and failure (i.e., punishments) at both the individual and organizational levels. Because the analysis of causation is a critical organizational competency, we are confident that the interest in attributional processes will continue to develop and thrive. Weiner (2019) expands on the history and trajectory of attributional processes in his invited contribution for this special issue. As the keynote speaker for the Third International Symposium on Attribution Theory, Weiner was highly influential in the evaluation and development of papers that ultimately contributed to this special issue. His recommendation to solve the dilemma of how to evaluate relational attributions identifies a way for attribution theory scholars to meaningfully advance the field and generate additional interest in efforts to extend attribution theory. We are hopeful that researchers will continue to seek to understand the dimensions of causation that can be generalized across different contexts and situations.

3 | CONCLUSION

Our motivation for this special issue was to illuminate and extend the current conversation within attribution theory research in the areas of both theory and application. The numerous study designs, research contexts, and focal topics to which attribution theory was applied in this special issue demonstrates the immense amount of opportunities for attribution theory to enrich our understanding of organizational behavior phenomena. Nevertheless, there are still many fruitful areas of inquiry, particularly with respect to theory development and the relationships between attributions and emotional processes. We hope that the contributions from this special issue and our general discussion of the issues that became salient during the development of the special issue provide guidance and motivation to continue the process of moving the field forward.

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