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The role, function, and contribution of attribution theory to leadership: A review

Mark J. Martinko [a,*], Paul Harvey [b,1], Scott C. Douglas [c,2]

[a] Department of Management, College of Business, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306, USA
[b] Department of Management, Whittemore School Of Business and Economics, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824, USA
[c] Department of Management, School of Business Administration, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review literature that has focused on the role of attributions in leadership processes and to explore and explain how the study of attributions does, and can, contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of leadership. The historical roots of attribution research are discussed, along with early attributional research in the leadership area. Two streams of attributional criticisms are addressed and recent attributional research relevant to leadership is reviewed. We argue and demonstrate that attributions account for significant proportions of the variance in leadership behaviors. We conclude with suggestions for including attributional perspectives in comprehensive models of leader behavior.

Keywords: Attribution; Attribution Style; Leadership; Leader-Member Relations

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review literature that has focused on the role of attributions in leadership processes and to explore and explain how the study of attributions does, and can, contribute to our understanding of leadership. There are at least three reasons why such a review and discussion is important to the field of leadership at this time. First, there have been more than 50 published studies concerned with the role of attributions in leadership processes since the late 1970s. Although there have been some general reviews of the role of attribution theory in the organizational sciences (Martinko, 1995; Martinko, 2004; Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006), we are unaware of any comprehensive review that focuses on the role of attributions in leadership processes. More importantly, there appears to have been little systematic effort to synthesize and understand this relatively large and significant body of research within the context of leadership.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 850 510 7066; fax: +1 850 644 7843.
E-mail addresses: mmartin@cob.fsu.edu (M.J. Martinko), paul.harvey@unh.edu (P. Harvey), scott.douglas@business.umt.edu (S.C. Douglas).
[1] Tel.: +1 603 862 3301; fax: +1 603 862 3383.
[2] Tel.: +1 406 243 6148.

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Second, as will be discussed below, there appears to be some confusion regarding the definition and role of attribution processes. In some cases it appears that the term attribution has been viewed as synonymous with perceptions, while in others attribution theory appears to be constrained within the domain of the theory originally suggested by Heider (1958), Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum (1971) and Kelley (1967). Clearing up these definitional problems and domain issues is important because there have been criticisms of attribution theory in the context of leadership processes (e.g., Cronshaw & Lord, 1987) that appear to be directed more toward perceptual processes in general rather than toward the domain that is typically considered to be encompassed by attribution theory. Misunderstandings of these criticisms need to be cleared up because they may lead to the rejection of attributional perspectives in situations where they can make valuable contributions.

Finally, as Weiner (2004) has noted, the extension of attribution theory into areas such as leadership has "stretched" attribution theory and has resulted in extensions of the theory that contribute to new research contexts, and also enhance and enrich the more general domain of attribution theory. We believe that it is important to point out these contributions.

We begin with a brief discussion of the historical roots of attribution research to clarify what we consider to be the domain of attribution theory. We then begin our review of the published literature within a historical context, starting with the work in the early 1980s conducted by Mitchell and his colleagues. Following the review of that body of literature, we examine the criticisms that have been directed toward attribution research, particularly those of Mitchell (1982), who was critical of his own work, and those of Lord and his colleagues (e.g., Cronshaw & Lord, 1987), which appear to hold attribution theory accountable for processes that are beyond its domain. Although there appeared to be a decline in attribution research in the leadership domain immediately after those criticisms, a steady stream of research has developed and continued through recent years. In the latter part of the manuscript we review that research, integrate it with the prior work, and describe how and where it contributes and can add to the domain of leadership research.

Before beginning our review, it is appropriate to delineate the criteria we used to select the articles for review. First, we wanted to make sure that we kept the scope of the review manageable and focused on leadership processes. Therefore, the articles we included had to either discuss or investigate leadership and attribution processes. Articles that discussed more general motivational processes such as goal setting, impression management, and employee selection were not included unless they were explicitly concerned with leadership processes within an attributional context. In addition, we did not consider articles that discussed leadership as a causal explanation for organizational performance (e.g., Lord, 1985; Staw, Mckechnie, & Puffer, 1983; Staw, 1975) in detail in this review because they are not concerned with leadership processes. Second, we searched the literature published in the major journals from 1975 to the present. Included among these journals were the *Academy of Management Journal*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Management*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Personnel Psychology*. Finally, we searched major databases including Google Scholar, Expanded Academic ASAP, JSTOR, ABI/Inform, and APA PsychArticles.

2. Attribution theory: Historical roots and definition

The origins of attribution theory are almost universally traced to the work of Fritz Heider (1958) and his notion that attributions are the result of the fundamental cognitive processes by which people ascertain cause and effect so that they can solve problems and become more efficacious in their interactions with their environments. Heider's most illustrative example was the notion of people as naïve psychologists trying to ascertain the causes of positive and negative outcomes. Thus, within Heider's original context and with respect to this review, an attribution is defined as a causal ascription for a positive or negative outcome.

The work of Heider was extended by Kelley (1971, 1973) and Weiner (1972, 1986). Kelley worked on the front end of the attribution process, identifying the types of information people used to make attributions (i.e., consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information). Weiner focused on the consequences of attributions and discussed how the dimensions (e.g., locus of causality, stability, and controllability) of attributional explanations (e.g., effort, ability, luck, and task difficulty) affected emotions and behavior. In addition to Weiner and Kelley, Jones (1976) and his colleagues (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & Nisbett, 1971) as well as many others (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Diener & Dweck, 1978; Ross, 1977) have made important contributions to the development of attribution theory.