

Research on the Application of Attribution Theory in Organizational Behavior

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Abstract: Attribution theory, proposed by Fritz Heider, explores how individuals attribute causes to events and behaviors, influencing attitudes and actions within organizations. The dimensions include locus of causality, stability, and controllability, which shape individuals' interpretations. This paper examines the dimensions and applications of attribution theory in organizational behavior. The self-serving attribution bias and the potential effects on performance and emotional responses are discussed. Additionally, Kelly's dimensions (consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency) offer insights into leader-member relationships. The paper highlights empirical findings and acknowledges limitations in applying attribution theory in workplace settings. Overall, attribution theory provides a valuable framework for understanding individuals' attributions and their implications in organizational behavior.

Keywords: Organizational behavior, Kelly, Heider, attribution theory.

1. Introduction

In the field of organizational behavior, understanding the factors that influence individuals' perceptions and judgments is crucial for comprehending their behavior and its impact on organizational dynamics. Attribution theory, founded by Fritz Heider, in his seminal work on attribution theory, who characterized people as naive psychologists with an innate interest in understanding the causes of successes and failures, is a famous psychological framework[1]. The theory itself offers valuable insights into how people, often complexly, attribute causes to events and behaviors, which, in turn, will affect their attitudes, motivations, and actions within organizations. This paper will, firstly, go over some dimensions of attribution theory and how those will create some of the biases people see in organization. Subsequently, the primary goal of this research will be to analyze the significance of attribution theory in the interpretation and manipulation of workplace events by highlighting some of its applications in the context of organizational behavior. By explaining the concepts of attribution theory and investigating its practical implications in organizational settings, individuals can develop a more nuanced and rather complete, but not perfect, understanding of the complexities involved in attributing causes to behavior and its implications for fostering a productive and harmonious work environment.

2. Application of Attribution Theory in Organizational Behavior

In Attribution theory, the framework itself, there are dimensions that sustain an individual's interpretation of the attribution of some events. Weiner's proposed that there are three main dimensions of attribution: locus of causality, stability and controllability[2]. The locus of causality, one of the most studied, describes whether individuals view the attribution as internal or external. Internal attributions can refer to the amount of effort or ability of a given individual. On the other hand, external attributions would be categorized as situational factors, such as luck, that are beyond one's control. To be cautious, one should note that this could lead to self-attribution bias, which should occur commonly in one's everyday life. The bias describes the tendency of an individual to justify his success to his personal ability or efforts and the failure to luck or general environments. Such bias is a slippery slope toward sadism, recently being discussed as the fourth dark personality amongst narcissists, machiavellian, psychopath, as proposed by Krafft-Ebing. Then, there is stability. This aspect of attributions might be explained by a person's perception of the permanence or variability of a causative element. For example, a person's effort level is more variable than their intelligence or personality, which are often considered to be relatively consistent factors [3]. This dimension is considered to be hand-in-hand with the locus of causality dimension. Logically, one's perception of the variability of attribution has to do with how one allocates the success or failure of the event as internal or external. To suggest a simple example, if an individual attributes his failure to a lack of ability, he will experience negative emotions such as frustration. Furthermore, one would simply give up in the future to engage in similar activity because ability is to be seen as stable, which means that the future outcomes of similar events will remain stable because an individual's ability will not change. Lastly, as Weiner suggests, there is controllability, which should be straightforward. The level to which an observer believes that someone's will is the source of a result is known as controllability [2]. To further explain, situational factors (weather, luck, traffic, etc) can be classified as uncontrollable and expertise, which can be obtained through efforts, is seen as controllable. Intentionality and globality are two more dimensions, but they greatly overlap or can be described in terms of the three previously listed dimensions. Kelly's consensus, distinctiveness and consistency are also well-known in psychology literature[4]. This framework is more suitable for observation purposes. Take consensus, whether behavior is stable across individuals in a given situation, for example, low consensus is considered to be dispositional (again, from an observer perspective) and high consensus is considered to be situational. Consistency examines the variation in behavior in a single situation, whereas distinctiveness observes the variation in behavior between situations. High consistency and stable behavior in a single context suggest a stable cause, and vice versa. High distinctiveness refers to behaviors exhibited in a single situation, and low distinctiveness implies behaviors exhibited across situations. In general, Weiner's dimensions are pertinent to the emotional and behavioral consequences of the attributions that were developed, whereas Kelly's dimensions concentrate on converting observed diversity in behaviors into attribution [2][4]. From the contention above, one can surely sense the complexity of how one formulates and reacts to the attribution that they and others enforce on themselves. It's because of this delicate complexity that attribution theory constructs vast, prosperous applications in disparate situations, but the equivocation itself also brings constraints and doubts at the same time. These will be explored in the context of organizational situations.

Alas, as was discussed in the previous paragraph, there are two main-stream dimension groups for attribution theory: Wiener's locus of causality, stability, and controllability, and Kelly's distinctiveness, consistency and consensus[3][4]. The latter provides an observational angle to dissect the consequential emotional and behavioral aftershock, which can be explained by the latter dimensions. In application, attribution theory can be used through empirical analysis to quantify the

effects of the dimensions formulated by Weiner and Kelly. The creators of Attribution theory in the organizational sciences: the road traveled and the path ahead state that they "Meta-analyze relationships between four distinct groups of occupational outcome parameters and the attributional dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability." [5]. The four categories are: affection (emotional responses), performance (effort and completion), leader-member relationship quality (leader-member exchange [LMX] ratings and overall harmonious relationships), and reward or punishment decisions. When it comes to the effect of the locus of causality, employees tend to follow the path of self-serving attributional bias. This means that employees will see unfavorable outcomes as caused by external attributions and allocate favorable outcomes to internal attributions. Again, this is a slippery slope to negative cyclical performance.

However, if adjusted properly by the manager, this could cause a positive snowball effect, in which the employee develops autonomy and mastery over his abilities. As for performance, predictably, employees see unfavorable outcomes as external and give negative performance, while favorable outcomes, attributed as internal, receive positive performance. (To clarify, these are based on meta-analyzed statistics, individuals would differ, nonetheless) One thing to note in locus of causality is that employees that receive negative outcomes that were associated with external attributions tend to see a decrease in negative rating in LMX. Stable attributions for positive occurrences were shown to have a significant relationship with affective responses in the other two dimensions. This suggests that stable attributions were linked to a lower level of negative affective reactions than unstable attributions [5]. The attribution of negative outcomes to personally controllable causes was associated with reduced levels of negative emotions and attitudes [5]. Not surprisingly, this is in alignment with the idea that controllable causes are less likely to engage with negative affective reactions because they could be avoided in the future [6]. Unfortunately, not enough research was done for categories other than affect to conclude any significant evidence for stability and controllability.

Overall, a trend can be observed. Self-serving attributional bias is strongly associated with the framework that Weiner proposed. This is good because now managers can use it as a guide to avoid self-serving attributional bias in the workplace. When it comes to Kelly's dimensions, there is great merit to their potential in solving the leader-member relationship issue [4]. It is evident that the dimensions hold significance in work settings as managers must evaluate the degree of agreement, consistency, and uniqueness of employees' behaviors in relation to their colleagues. The location, stability, and controllability of attributions are all influenced by these observations [7]. When people make these attributional observations, it makes sense to think that they form consistent tendencies and biases, which then affect how they react to employee actions and results. Consequently, managers may exhibit a tendency to perceive undesirable employee behaviors as highly consistent but lacking consensus and distinctiveness. At the personal level, this can mean taking one incident of an employee's tardiness and interpreting it as representative of their usual conduct. On a collective level, a manager may notice a worker in one area exhibiting comparable conduct and assume that this is standard procedure for that department. Such a tendency contributes to the well-known actor-observer bias, wherein observers (e.g., managers) downplay situational factors when making attributions about others' performance (e.g., employees) at both individual and group levels of analysis [8]. However, we can see some obvious limitations to its applications in the workplace. Most prominently, Managers often have limited capacity to observe employees, and often only have limited information about their employees [9]. If managers, in situations like this, used the three dimensions framework, there may be unfair decisions made.

3. Conclusion

In a general perspective, the attribution theory does provide individual, group or even organization with insightful information to understand other people's (in a social construct, often employees')

affective and physical consequential behaviors for any given outcomes in any given situation. However, individuals should take into account the complexity of human mind and the barrenness of information, which individuals typically, and mistakenly, assumed to have enough, while making attribution of their own and other's outcomes of an event, as briefly discussed at the end of last paragraph. With Wiener's locus of causality, stability, controllability in one hand and Kelly's distinctiveness, consistency, consensus in another, one should be able to, to say it with humility, make an educated guess on how individual attribute their outcomes and how individual would react, both emotionally and physically, to such attributions.

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