

The Role of the Fundamental Attribution Error in the Context of Human Resource Management

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Attribution theories are well established in the field of social psychology. However, the transfer to the context of human resource management is still developing. Only recently, the understanding of the importance of psychological insights in this field has begun to grow. The research takes a closer look on the way individuals locate the causes of their actions. It can potentially influence important decisions in the context of human resource management. This article sheds light on the theoretical foundations, causes, and effects.

Keywords: Attribution Theory, human resource management, attribution error

Introduction

If we want to find a place in our social environment, it is necessary to observe and quickly interpret certain events we encounter in order to find explanations. In the field of psychology, these subjective attributions of cause are called causal attributions (Buss, 1973). The Attribution Theory, originally developed by Fritz Heider (1958), provides answers as to how causal interferences are established. This approach was later developed into a comprehensive framework of attribution theories through complementary contributions by Kelley (1973) and Weiner (1979; 1985).

While the findings were immediately established with great enthusiasm in the field of psychology (Rudolph & Reizenzein, 2008; Weiner, 2008), the approach is slowly finding its way to being adapted in the context of business administration and especially in the field of Human Resource Management (HRM) (Hewetta, Shantz, Mundy, & Alfes, 2018). So far, the Attribution Theory has been and still is being neglected in organizational sciences (Martinko, Harvey, & Dasborough, 2011). However, it is important to get a better understanding on how and why people engage in both productive and counterproductive organizational behavior (Harvey, Madison, Martinko, T. R. Crook, & T. A. Crook, 2014).

To further understand the functionality of the fundamental attribution error, the theoretical framework of the Attribution Theory is highlighted. Subsequently, the findings are transferred into the context of human resource management. To do so, the research of the last decades is collected and transferred to the context of personnel management functions of selection and recruitment, performance management and training. The intention of this paper is to illustrate the applicability and transferability of psychological findings to management.

The Theoretical Context: Attribution Theory

The core of Attribution Theory revolves around the question of how people explain to themselves what they or others encounter (Ross, 2018). The foundation of attribution approaches lies in the work of Fritz Heider (1958). He stated that individuals put together common sense explanations of the world, to predict and control events (Harvey et al., 2014).

Heider was interested in how people recognize and explain the causes of their own behavior or the behavior of others. His conclusion was that people become a naïve or intuitive psychologists (Heider, 1958), who try to find a reasonable explanation by combining available information (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, & Sommers, 2019).

Individuals base their assessments of behaviors on two dimensions (Weiner, Nierenberg, & Goldstein, 1976):

- Locus of causality: Is the responsibility for the outcome embedded in the person him/herself (internal attribution) or is the outcome explained by the specific situation the person was in (external attribution)?
- Temporal stability: A temporally stable attribution is assumed when the cause is constant over time and situation. A variable attribution, on the other hand, refers to a cause that is only valid for a short period of time or in a specific situation.

Thus, there are four types of attribution causes, which are illustrated below by an example of a passed (success case) and failed test (failure case) (see Table 1).

Table 1 Results and assumed attributions

		Passed exam		Failed exam	
Time	Location	Internal	External	Internal	External
	Stable		Ability (I am smart)	Difficulty (simple questions)	Ability (I just don't get it)
Variable		Effort (I was well prepared)	Luck (I was lucky)	Effort (I wasn't well prepared)	Bad luck (The exam was unfair)

Empirical evidence shows that people tend to attribute events (e.g., exam success) to a certain type of cause (Berry & Frederickson, 2015; Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006). One's own success is usually attributed internally and often categorized as stable (own ability), whereas failures are usually attributed to external causes (bad luck and difficulty).

It is striking that the causes of attributions change once we observe the success and failure of others. Therefore, other people's success tends to be seen as the result of external effects, e.g., chance or luck ("in that situation, anyone would have managed that"; "he was lucky"). Failures, on the other hand, tend to be seen as the result of internal, i.e., person-related attributions ("he was like that before"; "he will never learn"; "he is completely unsuitable for that") and the influence of situational factors is neglected (Ross, 1977; Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

This relation is known as fundamental attribution error. Observers overestimate (in case of failure of others) the internal, disposition-related factors of others and underestimate the external, situational factors. In case of success, the attribution causes are reversed (focus on situational factors).

What is the reason for this effect? The salience of the observed is cited as one explanation (Harvey & Weary, 1984). When we observe other people, the person is our primary reference point, while an underlying situation cannot be grasped. People and their actions are more visible and are therefore easier to perceive than situations (Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbacher, 2002). In contrast to the salient connection between a person and their action, the norms of society and the direct circumstances of an action are often not observable. Therefore, they are easily overseen by the observer. Vice versa, when we observe ourselves, we are more aware of the situational factors. The resulting perspectives are known as actor-observer bias (Smith & Miller, 1979).

Another explanatory approach is provided by the so-called Error Management Theory (Galperin & Haselton, 2007; McKay & Efferson, 2010). People can observe a person's behavior and attribute it to an internal cause, although external-situational factors would have been applicable (Type I error). On the other hand, people sometimes attribute external-situational causes, although internal-person factors would have been applicable (Type II error) (analogous to Type I and Type II errors in standard hypothesis testing).

In most situations, the Type I error seems less problematic. For example, when observing someone behaving aggressively, it makes sense to treat the person with general caution, even if he or she is normally peaceful, and only showed this aggressive behavior in this specific situation. Ergo it is more effective for observers to initially attribute internal-personal cause for general behavior control.

Lerner and Miller (1977) discussed the just-world fallacy as an explanation for the fundamental attribution error. It describes the belief that people get what they deserve and that they deserve what they get. Our need to believe that the world is fair and controllable, reduces the perceived threat, and increases the feeling of security. We tend to blame people for suffering a disaster (e.g., have been the victim of a crime or a car accident) and, on the other hand, try to assure ourselves that we are protected from getting into such an accident (Walster, 1966).

Attributional Theory and Workplace Outcomes

Across a number of human resource (HR) functional domains, attribution theories have been established to explain interpersonal processes and attributions of behavior and events. So far, only a few review articles have addressed the relationship between human resource management and attribution error. The following section is based on studies from Hewetta et al. (2018) and Harvey et al. (2014).

Selection and Recruitment

The following example illustrates a situation in which the attribution error could occur. If a candidate is late for a selection interview, he or she will state that situational factors (traffic jams, train delays, and detours) caused him or her to be late (external attribution); if you ask the HR manager, he or she will tend to attribute the delay to an internal cause (unreliable, not motivated enough).

Tay, Ang, and Van Dyne (2006) investigated the moderating role of locus of causality attributions on the relationship between interview success and subsequent self-efficacy for being interviewed. They found that successful candidates display higher levels of interview self-efficacy when they believed that their success was due to internal rather than external factors. Similarly, Thompson, Sikora, Perrewé, and Ferris (2015) found that interviewers rate candidates better when they attribute CV events to internal factors (the desire for a better work-life balance) instead of external factors (being unemployed due to downsizing).

Training

Students were asked to complete a complex task and were then randomly assigned to either a revision or an advanced group. Assuming they were assigned on base of their demonstrated performance of the task, the students were then asked to rate whether it was due to luck, effort, or ability. The advanced group rated their ability significantly higher than the revision group, who rated the luck factor significantly higher (Quinones, 1995).

Performance Management

The connection between achievement-related attribution and performance evaluation can be observed well in the context of performance management.

Managers attribute internal factors of their employees as reason for poor performance (Dugan, 1989). When managers perceive the poor performance is within the control of the employees and not due to external factors, the evaluations are even more negative (Zhang, Reyna, & Huang, 2011). As a result, most suggestions for improvement tend to refer to internal-oriented factors (training or behavioral changes) rather than changing the external-situational factors (Green & Liedien, 1980). Employees were more likely to be satisfied with feedback based on internal attributions, as they have control over these factors (self-serving bias) (Levy, Cawley, & Foti, 1998).

In project management, the fundamental attribution error mainly occurs in the project evaluation phase. If the project was carried out on time, within budget and without any major difficulties, the project evaluator (e.g., the superior of the project manager) tends to rate the performance of the project implementation as normal (“everything was prepared so far”; “there were hardly any difficulties”). If the project was delayed or could not be implemented within budget, there is a distinctive tendency to attribute the occurrence of problems to internal factors of the project manager (“did not anticipate the problems”, “was not attentive enough”) and to underestimate the external situational factors (e.g., environmental influences).

What Can We Learn From This?

The social psychology literature has shown that the attributions approach can be applied to almost every domain of human behavior (Harvey et al., 2014). One of the questions of interest would be: Can we protect ourselves from falling for the fundamental attribution error? The most effective strategy seems to be: knowing there are shortcomings in decision making and trying not to fall for them. Once we recognize the fundamental attribution error, we may be able to avoid it.

However, a study from Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002) shows that this strategy is not sufficient. After participants had just been educated about the fundamental attribution error, it was still found in their assessments. It shows that the attribution error maybe is too persistent and deeply embedded in us.

What can organizations do to help employees not to fall for the fundamental attribution error? HR leaders should ensure that they have a clear idea of the purpose of HR activities and if the message they send is understood and effective. That means that HRM needs to understand how the HR activities are interpreted by both, line managers applying the instruments and employees addressed by the instruments. A good advice for managers would be to understand “why these activities exist in the first place?” An implementation strategy for conversations about HR practices with employees is important to ensure that messages are consistent and the impact of biases is reduced (Hewetta et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Although attribution theory has a long history in social psychology, it has only recently fully leveraged by HR scholars. This paper synthesizes and draws insights from attribution theory and its effects on human resource management. An analysis of relevant papers revealed that attribution theory has much to say about HR-related decisions and can make several contributions to HR scholarly work. But we can also see patterns of findings that can direct future research (Hewetta et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2014).

Most of the studies were carried out in traditional HR functions like performance appraisals, selection and training. This created a need for further research in the areas of human resource management, which are now just as much part of the core of HR activities, for example how employees and managers make attributions in the context of work-life balance initiatives, strategic alignment, industrial relations or diversity and inclusion. Exploring the effect, the fundamental attribution can have could lead to a broader understanding both in psychology and HRM.

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