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Critical realism and attribution theory in qualitative research

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to develop an integrative model that explains how incorporating the two epistemological positions of critical realism and attribution theory can help qualitative organisational researchers better understand the reality of social actors through different lenses. In addition, the paper aims to demonstrate the application of the model through a study of organisational justice perceptions of elite Muslim professionals undergoing performance appraisal in the UK banking sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach adopted used semi-structured in-depth interviews with Muslim professionals in elite positions in UK Western and Islamic banks. Access to participants was secured through a process of purposive and snowball sampling, a tool often used to recruit hard-to-reach populations. The data were analysed through the integrative model developed in this paper.

Findings – The integration of critical realism and attribution theory provided different dimensionalities of social reality. Attribution theory enabled a systematic identification of social phenomena and their causal mechanisms, defined the characteristics of those mechanisms, and highlighted who/what is responsible for and affected by them. Critical realism distinguished between causal mechanisms and the generative forces that help those mechanisms to be actualised and have effect.

Originality/value – The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, to the best of my knowledge, it is the first paper to build a novel integrative model of these two epistemologies. Second, it presents a detailed application of the model in a contemporary study of the perceptions of justice of Muslims in the UK banking sector.

Keywords Critical realism, Attribution theory, Qualitative research, Elite Muslims, Banking sector

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Both critical realism and attribution theory strive to understand the causal structure of social reality and yet the link between these two methodological stances has not so far been considered in social sciences. In addition, scholars have emphasised the lack of practical application for critical realism in social science research (Eastwood *et al.,* 2014; Eastwood *et al.,* 2016; Fletcher, 2017). The aim of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it builds an integrative model that demonstrates the relationship between the epistemological positions of

36 critical realism and attribution theory, and explains how the model can provide different

37 dimensionalities of social reality. Second, it illustrates the application of the model through

38 an example study of the perceptions of organisational justice expressed by elite Muslim

39 professionals undergoing the process of performance appraisal in the UK banking sector (Al-

40 Sharif, 2019).

41   The paper begins with the ontological and epistemological orientations of critical

42 realism. Then, an integrative model that demonstrates the link between critical realism and

43 attribution theory will be discussed. After that, a study of elite Muslims' justice perceptions

44 in performance appraisal will be outlined to elaborate how the model can be utilised. Finally,

45 the paper concludes with an agenda of practical implications for improving the justice

46 perceptions of stigmatised groups.

47 **Critical realism - Ontological and epistemological orientations**

48   Profound and, in some instances, contradictory philosophies that hold distinct

49 ontological and epistemological positions have been introduced into the social sciences. The

50 term ontology refers to the nature and existence of reality, while an epistemological position

51 strives to answer the question of what is/should be an acceptable way of acquiring that

52 knowledge (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Bhaskar (1989, p. 1)

53 emphasises the 'need to take philosophy seriously because it is the discipline that has

54 traditionally underwritten both what constitutes science or knowledge and which political

55 practices are deemed legitimate'. A positivist position, for instance, is concerned with the

56 empirical observation of reality, presuming that reality exists externally and independently of

57 social actors, and can be examined and explained objectively in the same way as the natural

58 sciences (Hwang, 2019). In contrast, an interpretivist position emphasises the fundamental

59 difference between individuals and the objects of natural sciences, and argues that reality is

60   socially constructed through the experiences and perceptions of social actors (Eliaeson, 2002;

61   Elster, 2007). Whilst positivism strives to provide explanations of human behaviours by

62   identifying regularities and causal relationships, interpretivism is concerned with the

63   understanding of human behaviours (Flick, 2014). Both philosophies are therefore criticised

64   for reducing reality to human knowledge, or in other words, limiting ontology to

65   epistemology (Danermark *et al.,* 2002; Fletcher, 2017). Bhaskar (1978, p. 36) calls this

66   notion 'the epistemic fallacy'. For example, positivism limits reality to what can be examined

67   empirically, which is predominantly influenced by initial theoretical frameworks (Bhaskar,

68   1998; Danermark *et al.,* 2002; Fletcher, 2017; McEvoy and Richards, 2006; Olsen, 2004).

69   This philosophical stance also assumes that certain aspects of a social phenomenon interact in

70   a closed system, failing to take into account the interactions with, and impact of other

71   external mechanisms (McEvoy and Richards, 2006). It asserts the universality of law-like

72   knowledge, and is thus unable to sustain individual and socially produced reality (Bhaskar,

73   1989). Moreover, positivism does not show the conditions that lie behind experience or why

74   it is significant in the social sciences (Bhaskar, 1975). In contrast, interpretivism holds that

75   reality is solely and entirely socially constructed through and within people's experiences,

76   knowledge and discourse (Eliaeson, 2002; Elster, 2007). Its ontological view is restricted to

77   subjective meanings which limit this philosophical position when it comes to understanding

78   the structure that underlies social reality (McEvoy and Richards, 2006).

79   Critical realism is a philosophical stance that holds a compromise/alternative position

80   between/of positivism and interpretivism, and tends to avoid these criticisms (Bhaskar, 1975,

81   1979, 1989). It was introduced as a philosophy of science by Bhaskar (1975, 1979, 1989),

82   who initially labelled it Transcendental Realism and Critical Naturalism. It was adopted and

83   explained further by other key critical realists (e.g. Archer, 1995; Collier, 1994; Lawson,

84   1997; Sayer, 1992). Bhaskar (1989, p. 2) claims that 'critical realists do not deny the reality

85 of events and discourses; on the contrary, they insist upon them. But they hold that we will be

86 able to understand - and so change - the social world if we identify the structures at work that

87 generate those events or discourses'. Critical realism contends that social reality cannot be

88 de-contextualised (Stylianou and Scott, 2018). In fact, social reality occurs in open systems

89 that incorporate interactions between both internal and external contexts (Brown, 2009;

90 Stylianou, 2017; Stylianou and Scott, 2018). In an open system, a social reality is generated,

91 activated and explained through three distinctive ontological stratifications: the *empirical*

92 domain which refers to people's direct observation and experience of events; the *actual*

93 domain, involving the events that occur irrespective of whether or not they are observed; and

94 the *real* domain which includes the causal mechanisms that generate such events (Bhaskar,

95 1975, p. 13). These causal mechanisms are not openly observable; they are however inferred

96 through both theoretical knowledge and empirical investigation (McEvoy and Richards,

97 2006). Critical realists use the iceberg metaphor (Bhaskar, 1975), where reality might not be

98 what is observed at the top but rather deep down in the iceberg. Positivist quantitative

99 research is confined to the top two stratifications, in which linear causality of an observable

100 behaviour is examined through a closed system, using pre-identified variables (Roberts,

101 2014). In contrast, critical realism emphasises the importance of understanding causality

102 beyond closed systems (Bhaskar, 1975). Thus, it introduces a qualitative theory of causality

103 which has rarely been applied in the social sciences (Eastwood, Jalaludin, & Kemp, 2014;

104 Eastwood *et al.,* 2016; Fletcher, 2017). A qualitative approach to critical realism involves

105 causal mechanisms that emerge from real open systems to show the power of social actors'

106 voices (Ragin, 1994; Roberts, 2014), given that individuals tend to find explanations for the

107 causes of their positive and negative experiences (Heider, 1958). This takes us to attribution

108 theory and its relationship to critical realism.

109 **Critical realism & attribution theory: An integrative model**

110   Critical realism holds that we will be able to understand the world not only through

111   observable and non-observable social events (the empirical and actual domains), but most

112   importantly through identifying the causal mechanisms of these events (the real domain)

113   (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979, 1989). Therefore, its epistemological position (see model 1) tends to

114   identify social events and their causal mechanism in the three aforementioned domains of

115   reality. An important approach designed to enhance the understanding of causal mechanisms

116   is attribution theory, which was introduced by Heider (1958) and has influenced the work of

117   other social psychologists (e.g. Jones and Davis, 1965; Jones and Nisbett, 1972; Kelley, 1967;

118   Rotter, 1966). This theory describes people as *naïve psychologists* involved in attribution

119   processes to understand the causes of positive and negative events, and their attribution of

120   these events informs their perceptions and reactions (Heider, 1958; Martinko*et al.,* 2011).

121   The identification of these causal attributions can help them predict and control the

122   environment, and organise their future goals (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958).

123   Throughout the employment relationship, employees are spontaneously involved in a process

124   of sense-making to explain the causes of any success or failure, especially during threatening

125   situations or events (Weiner, 1986, 1987; Wong and Weiner, 1981). The causal attribution

126   processes begin when an individual asks a question that starts with 'why?' (Kelley, 1973).

127   For example, on not receiving a fair performance appraisal outcome, a member of a

128   stigmatised group might ask, 'why have not I received a good performance appraisal outcome,

129   despite achieving my objectives?' While critical realism holds a philosophical view of causal

130   reality, the epistemological position of attribution theory introduces a systematic approach to

131   identifying effects (events/experiences) and their causes from the narratives of social actors.

132   Attribution scholars tend to scrutinise these narratives in order to identify such

133   events/experiences, and then link them directly and systematically to their causal mechanisms

134   (Jones and Davis, 1965; Jones and Nisbett, 1972; Kelley, 1967; Rotter, 1966).

135 ------------------------

136 Insert Model 1 about here

137 ------------------------

138   After identifying causes and effects, the critical realism framework then involves a

139 theoretical re-description process known as abduction. This is the 'inference or thought

140 operation, implying that a particular phenomenon or event is interpreted from a set of general

141 ideas or concepts' (Danermark *et al.,* 2002, p. 205). In this process critical realists move back

142 and forth between the concrete and the abstract, using theoretical concepts to re-describe

143 social experiences and the causal mechanisms identified (Eastwood *et al.,* 2014).

144   Importantly, the role of critical realism does not end at identifying social events and

145 their causal mechanisms. At the heart of critical realism is the search for the generative forces

146 necessary to provide the conditions for the causal mechanisms to operate and be actualised

147 (Eastwood *et al.,* 2014; Eastwood *et al.,* 2016). This process is called 'retroduction' and it is a

148 distinct contribution of critical realism theory (Danermark *et al.,* 2002). It is concerned with

149 finding the essential conditions that necessitate the functioning of causal mechanisms

150 (Bhaskar, 1979). Retroduction moves from concrete analysis of a social phenomenon to the

151 reconstruction of its underlying causal structure (Danermark *et al.,* 2002). Thus, while in the

152 real domain, causal mechanisms cause social events in the actual and empirical domains; in

153 fact, these causal mechanisms can establish prerequisite conditions to enable them to operate,

154 and in turn cause social phenomena.

155   The framework of attribution theory takes the process of causality one step further.

156 Not only does it seek to explore the causal mechanisms of events and experiences, it also

157 aims to identify who/what is responsible for (agent) and influenced by (target) them, and

158 introduces five dimensions to describe these causal mechanisms. Consequently, attribution

159   theory adds a further dimensionality to critical realism and its perspective on causality. It

160   distinguishes between the causal *mechanisms* of a social phenomenon and the causal

161   *dimensions* that pertain to the underlying characteristics of the causal mechanisms (Kent and

162   Martinko, 1995). Individuals use these dimensions to understand the characteristics of the

163   causal mechanisms of their experiences, considering whether those mechanisms are internal-

164   external-relational-situational, stable-unstable, global-specific, personal-universal-group, or

165   controllable-uncontrollable (Hatzakis, 2009; Silvester, 2004; Stratton*et al.,* 1988). This paper

166   introduces a sixth dimension, *contextual-general,* that can add a further perspective to causal

167   mechanisms. The internal-external dimension pertains to the locus of causality addressing

168   whether the cause is initiated by the speaker (internal) or by an external source (Rotter, 1966;

169   Silvester, 1997; Weiner, 1985). However, attributional scholars claim that a cause of a

170   specific social phenomenon might not only be initiated by one of these two sources (Eberly *et*

171   *al.,* 2011, 2017; Harveyet al., 2014). They argue that social events can evolve through a

172   dyadic force of both internal and external sources, referring to *relational attributions*. These

173   emerge when we locate the explanation of our experiences within the relationship we

174   (internal) have with others (external) (Eberly *et al.,* 2017). Other scholars suggest that events

175   can be provoked by the situational circumstances within which such a social phenomenon

176   occurs, and thus the cause can be *situational* in nature (Hatzakis, 2009; Silvester and

177   Chapman, 1997). The stable-unstable dimension is concerned with whether the cause is likely

178   to have a permanent effect over time (Weiner *et al.,* 1971). Thus, the cause is stable if it is

179   constantly in operation and will have similar outcomes in the future, whereas it is unstable

180   when it is unlikely to have impact over time (Stratton *et al.,* 1988). The global-specific

181   dimension infers the sphere of the cause and the extent to which it has a specific consequence

182   or many (Abramson*et al.,* 1978; Silvester, 1997, 2004). For example, negative stereotypes

183   about women and ethnic minorities have several negative consequences, affecting their

184 access to employment, career progression and interpersonal treatment in the workplace, as

185 well as in wider society (Derous *et al.,* 2009; Kadi, 2014; von Hippel *et al.,* 2015). The

186 personal-universal dimension is concerned with whether the causes only affect the speaker or

187 apply to everyone (Hatzakis, 2009; Silvester, 1997). Nevertheless, the outcomes of certain

188 causes can influence a particular social *group* (of whom the speaker is (not) a member). An

189 alternative terminology for the *group* dimension is the *role* dimension, a term which is used

190 by attributional scholars when the causes are attributed to certain groups who hold particular

191 roles that influence their behaviour (Hatzakis, 2009). For example, line managers' behaviour

192 towards subordinates can be driven by the authoritative nature of their roles. In this paper

193 however, the term 'group' is used when the outcomes pertain to a certain social group. This

194 dimension is dominated by the prevalent stereotypes held about particular groups (Hatzakis,

195 2009). For instance, the performance of women and ethnic minorities in the field of financial

196 services can be undermined due to preconceived negative stereotypes about their intellectual

197 ability, irrespective of their actual performance (Spencer *et al.,* 1999; Steele and Aronson,

198 1995; von Hippel *et al.,* 2015). Finally, the controllable-uncontrollable dimension refers to

199 the extent to which the cause can be controlled by the speaker without significant effort

200 (Weiner, 1979). This particular dimension shows individuals' levels of helplessness when it

201 comes to controlling the causes of their experiences (Maier and Seligman, 1976; Seligman,

202 1975). If the outcome of the cause is inevitable, it means that the cause is uncontrollable,

203 whereas if the individual has control over the cause of a particular outcome, it is controllable

204 (Stratton *et al.,* 1988). Theoretical and meta-analytical research emphasises the role these

205 dimesions play in providing complex perspectives on causality, and shows the robustness and

206 acceptance of these dimensions by attributional theorists and researchers (Hatzakis, 2009;

207 Rotter, 1966; Russell *et al.,* 1987; Seligman and Schulman, 1986; Silvester, 1997; Sweeney *et*

208 *al.,* 1986; Weiner, 1985; Weiner *et al.,* 1971).

209   The sixth causal dimension which this paper suggests pertains to whether the cause is

210   contextual or general. An organisational context is defined as 'situational opportunities and

211   constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organisational behaviour as well as

212   functional relationships between variables' (Johns, 2006, p. 386). It is a combination of

213   organisational structure, culture, climates, values, strategy and human resource management

214   (HRM) policies. Organisational contexts have important effects on employees' experiences

215   and perceptions. For example, unlike in female-dominated contexts, in male-dominated

216   contexts, such as financial services institutions, women can face glass ceiling challenges in

217   accessing leadership positions (von Hippel *et al.,* 2015). Accordingly, a cause can be

218   contextual when it is fundamentally related to the context in which it emerges, while it can be

219   general if it occurs irrespective of any contextual influences. Even though scholars have

220   called for research that investigates the impact of the context on the experiences of social

221   actors (Fuglsang and Jagd, 2015; Grimpe, 2019; Johns, 2018; Mishra and Mishra, 2013;

222   Möllering, 2012), this notion has so far received little attention in organisational research.

223   This paper explains how different organisational contexts can play an important role in

224   shaping the perceptions and experiences of social actors.

225   Prior studies have used attribution theory in organisational and HRM research,

226   including recruitment and selection (e.g. Tomlinson and Carnes, 2015), performance

227   appraisal (e.g. Feldman, 1981), feedback (e.g. Tolli and Schmidt, 2008), career progression

228   (e.g. Wyatt and Silvester, 2015), and turnover (e.g. Huning and Thomson, 2010). However,

229   the majority of attributional scholars have adopted a positivist approach, extracting the causal

230   attributions so they can be quantified and described in relation to the five attributional

231   dimensions, thus losing the richness of qualitative data (Silvester, 2004; Wyatt and Silvester,

232   2015). This paper presents a more qualitative perspective of the analytical framework of

233 attribution theory, while being incorporated into the critical realist analysis framework

234 (CRAF).

235   A practical example from the study of Muslims' organisational justice perceptions in

236 the process of performance appraisal in two different contexts, UK Western and Islamic

237 banks (Al-Sharif, 2019), will make it possible to elaborate on how this integrative model was

238 used in qualitative research.

239 **Example application of the integrative model: Muslim employees' perceptions of**

240 **organisational justice**

241   This research project investigated Muslims' positive and negative experiences and

242 expectations of organisational justice in a key HRM process, performance appraisal.

243 Performance appraisal systems are evaluative tools for measuring the quantity and quality of

244 employees' work at specific intervals in the employment relationship (Skinner and Searle,

245 2011). Organisational justice was used as a guiding theory to investigate the perceptions of

246 this social group in performance appraisal. Organisational justice theory has four distinct

247 constructs: *distributive justice* which pertains to the perceived fairness of the distribution of

248 the outcome of the performance appraisal process (Adams, 1965; Gilliland, 1993);

249 *procedural justice* refers to the perceived fairness of the procedures enacted in the

250 distribution of these outcomes and whether they are free of bias and based on adequate

251 familiarity with subordinates' performance (Folger *et al.,* 1992; Gilliland, 1993);

252 *interpersonal justice* is concerned with the quality of workplace interpersonal treatment and

253 whether it is based on professionalism and respect (Gilliland and Hale, 2005); and

254 *informational justice* is associated with the perceived clarity of pre-identified appraisal

255 objectives and adequacy of feedback (Folger *et al.,* 1992; Gilliland, 1993). Organisational

256 justice theory has been extensively adopted in performance appraisal research; however, such

257   research is theory-determined using scientific positivist data collection approaches (e.g.

258   Colquitt *et al.,* 2012; Farndale and Kelliher, 2013). Unlike positivist research methods in the

259   observation of facts to produce data that are always theory-determined, critical realism

260   research is theory-laden or guided by theory (Danermark *et al.,* 2002). At the heart of critical

261   realism, theory and scientific knowledge can provide guidance for research, yet they remain

262   fallible (Bhaskar, 1979; Potter and López, 2001; Redman-MacLaren and Mills, 2015).

263   Accordingly, since this study aimed to explore Muslims' perceptions of fairness in

264   performance appraisal, the organisational justice theory framework was only utilised to guide

265   the researcher during the research process.

266   *Data collection*

267   Like other critical realists (e.g. Eastwood *et al.,* 2014; Eastwood *et al.,* 2016; Fletcher,

268   2017), this study started from the empirical level using extensive and intensive data

269   (Danermark *et al.,* 2002). The extensive data included two systematic literature reviews. The

270   first review explored forms of workplace discrimination against Muslims in Western

271   countries, while the second investigated the relationship between organisational justice and

272   trust in the process of performance appraisal (Al-Sharif, 2019). These reviews informed the

273   rationale of the research, enriched the researcher's knowledge about the topic under

274   investigation, and underlined important gaps in the current literature. These reviews revealed

275   that, in the UK, Muslims face more workplace challenges than the majority of people and

276   more than all other social groups, and yet their experiences in HRM processes have so far

277   received little attention (Al-Sharif, 2019). In addition, there were significant methodological

278   issues (e.g. non-representative samples, poorly operationalised variables, statistical bias, etc.)

279   within the current literature which predominantly adopted a reductionist approach of

280   quantitative data collection methods, such as regression analysis of census data and

281   experiments on students (Al-Sharif, 2019). In contrast, the intensive data used in this research

282   relied on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 Muslim professionals in elite positions,

283   elite being defined as *'the thin layer of individuals with the greatest influence, prestige, and*

284   *power in an institutional sphere'* (Zuckerman, 1972, p. 159), in UK Western ($n = 6$) and

285   Islamic ($n = 5$) banks. The participants were in either senior or top managerial positions and

286   their participation was secured through a process of purposive and snowball sampling, a tool

287   often used to recruit *hard-to-reach* populations, such as elite minorities in the banking sector

288   (e.g. Cornelius and Skinner, 2008; Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016; Wyatt and Silvester, 2015).

289   The focus on elites provided in-depth insight on different stages of their careers. Finally, the

290   systematic reviews revealed that scholars have largely not defined what discrimination means

291   and how theories of discrimination informed their research, and they have not explained their

292   findings through the lens of the theories they refer to either. In line with critical realism,

293   organisational justice theory was used as a guiding theory in this study. Theory-laden

294   questions,   such   as   *'do   you   think   that   the   outcome/procedure/interpersonal*

295   *treatment/information received during the performance appraisal process was fair? Why?'*

296   were posed, but questions were not limited to this type. The interviews were then transcribed

297   and analysed using the Critical Realist Analysis Framework (CRAF) in which the Leeds

298   Attributional Coding System (LACS: Munton, Silvester, Stratton, & Hanks, 1999) was

299   incorporated (see model 1).

300   *Analysis*

301   *An application of the integrative model*

302   As mentioned earlier, critical realism has three interconnected analytical stages,

303   namely identification of social experiences and causal mechanisms, abduction and

304   retroduction. The following section explains in a non-technical way how these stages were

305   utilised in the model, while integrating the attribution theory framework in the analysis of the

306   qualitative data:

307   *Identification of experiences and expectations of justice, and their causal mechanisms*

308   The processing of qualitative data is crucial in critical realism, since it produces the

309   events and the causal mechanisms before the abduction and retroduction stages (Fletcher,

310   2017). In the first stage of the CRAF, researchers look for social phenomena and their

311   underlying causal structure (Danermark *et al.,* 2002). Here, the LACS was incorporated (for

312   full details see Munton *et al.,* 1999; Silvester, 2004; Stratton *et al.,* 1988). The incorporation

313   of the LACS into the CRAF helped to systematically and thoroughly identify social

314   phenomena (positive and negative perceptions of justice) and their causal mechanisms in the

315   causal attributions extracted from the manuscripts (also known as the source of attributions).

316   A causal attribution is a statement showing an 'indication of the relationship between events,

317   outcomes and/or behaviours, and their causes' (Stratton *et al.,* 1988, p. 44). It is a statement

318   'identifying a factor or factors that contribute to a given outcome' (Joseph, Brewing, Yule, &

319   Williams, 1993, p. 251). Following Silvester's (2004) approach, the causes are identified by

320   arrows (← →) indicating the direction of the causes, while slashes (/) are utilised to show the

321   beginning or the end of these effects. For example:

322   ------------------------

323   Insert Figure 1 about here

324   -----------------------

325   Not only did attribution coding show the importance of each sentence in the narratives,

326   it also highlighted the significance of every single word. A total of 191 causal attributions

327   were extracted in relation to positive ($n = 157$) and negative ($n = 34$) perceptions of

328 organisational justice in both Western and Islamic banks. In line with critical realism, there
329 was an initial coding list of 14 codes evolved from the two systematic reviews, which was
330 increased to 26 codes during the coding process, and then reduced to 17 after discussions
331 with two experienced qualitative researchers. This made it possible to focus the codes on
332 achieving the research objectives. The findings are presented from the lens of the social
333 group under investigation. After their interviews, two participants were consulted over the
334 development of the codebook and they were also included in discussions with the researcher
335 about the findings. It was not possible to do this with all other participants, who were not able
336 to make time for follow-up. Furthermore, as an insider to this industry and social group, the
337 researcher is aware that the findings represent discourses that are common within this group.
338 Therefore, in contrast to current attributional research, this study addresses the subjective
339 concerns of such research, where coding has been done solely from the perspective of the
340 researchers, or by outsiders to the social group under investigation (Silvester, 2004; Wyatt
341 and Silvester, 2015). Findings and quotations were also discussed and agreed with two other
342 experienced qualitative researchers (white Christian women).

343   In both contexts, the causal mechanisms of positive perceptions of organisational
344 justice were dominated by the way in which participants' managers applied distributive,
345 procedural, interpersonal and informational justice (see Table 1). These findings support
346 extant research on perceptions of justice in performance appraisal systems (e.g. Colquitt *et al.,*
347 2012; Korsgaard and Roberson, 1995). Hard work was a key code which emerged from those
348 in Western banks, where the participants attributed their positive perceptions of justice to their
349 own hard work. This finding corroborates existing research, which shows that members of
350 minority groups work harder and longer, and travel further to get the same credit as their
351 white counterparts (Kadi, 2014; Kulwicki *et al.,* 2008; Shah and Shaikh, 2010; Wyatt and
352 Silvester, 2015). Negative perceptions of justice were confined to Western banks, and were

353   attributed to managers failing to apply the four aforementioned organisational justice

354   constructs. For example, in the Western context participants attributed their negative

355   perceptions to not being given the opportunity to discuss and agree on their objectives and

356   assessment criteria at the beginning of the appraisal cycle. They further reported lack of clear

357   pre-identified objectives and constructive feedback, leaving them confused about what

358   objectives were to be achieved, what assessment criteria would be utilised, and what

359   improvement they needed to attain to fulfil those objectives. These results support prior

360   research which shows that minority groups receive 'fluffy feedback' that does not help them

361   to understand what is required from them, and how they can subsequently improve their

362   performance (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015: 1259). In addition, the participants referred to

363   workplace hostility and racial harassment by line managers during the appraisal process

364   which had an adverse impact on the outcome of the appraisal.

365   The attributions revealed further causal mechanisms that stemmed from the macro-

366   environment, including negative stereotypes, politics (political instability in the Middle East,

367   Brexit and terrorist events) and negative media representation of Muslims in the UK. These

368   causal mechanisms negatively changed line managers' workplace attitudes towards this social

369   group, which led to negative experiences and expectations of justice, supporting results from

370   previous research on workplace discrimination against Muslims (Al-Sharif, 2019).

371   ------------------------

372   Insert Table 1 about here

373   ----------------------

374   At this stage, even though perceptions of justice at the empirical and actual levels, and

375   causal mechanisms at the real level were identified, it was still not clear how these causal

376   mechanisms operated, and what conditions helped them to be actualised. Therefore, the data

377 were further analysed using the retroduction stage to identify the generative forces of these

378 causal mechanisms, and to restructure the process of causality. However, prior to retroduction,

379 these perceptions of justice and their causal mechanisms were theoretically re-described using

380 the abduction approach.

381 *Abduction*

382   Three forms of abduction are suggested, including overcoded, undercoded and

383 creative (Eco, 1986). The mode of inference in overcoded abduction relies on spontaneous

384 cultural and social preconceptions of reality, while in undercoded abduction inference stems

385 from theoretical concepts and literature (Eastwood *et al.,* 2014). Creative abduction is used

386 predominantly in the natural sciences when a researcher reaches uniquely invented

387 interpretations of reality (Eco, 1986). In this study, the undercoded abduction approach was

388 utilised. In this process of re-contextualisation or re-description of social phenomena and

389 their underlying causal structure, theoretical concepts from the literature of organisational

390 justice and discrimination as well as research on the social group under investigation were

391 utilised. The abduction process was found to be beneficial when combined with attribution

392 coding. In attribution coding, narratives are accurately analysed sentence by sentence. Taking

393 every sentence/attributional statement through the abduction process added a detailed and

394 precise interpretation of the data. For example, in a full quotation, while the attributional

395 statements had similar inferences of organisational justice, further inspection of these

396 statements independently and accurately showed that in fact each attributional statement

397 belongs to a specific construct of the four organisational justice constructs. More critically,

398 every statement inferred a distinct aspect/rule within each organisational justice construct

399 (see Figure 1). Having carried this out with all 191 causal attributions, retroduction analysis

400 of the data was conducted.

401 *Retroduction*

402   Using the retroduction approach to identify the generative forces of the causal

403   mechanisms led to a more sophisticated perspective on reality, with three key themes – *the*

404   *Western context*, *hard work* and *an elite position in the organisational hierarchy* – enabling

405   the other causal mechanisms to come into operation. For example, in the Western context,

406   even though the participants attributed their positive perceptions of justice to their managers'

407   application of organisational justice constructs, they indicated that it was their hard work that

408   provided the condition for their managers to be fair in the appraisal process. Furthermore, the

409   elite positions the participants occupied in the organisational hierarchy enabled them to have

410   a high level of control over the fairness of the appraisal process, forcing their managers to act

411   fairly. This interpretation is consistent with Korsgaard *et al.*'s (1998) early work. Their study

412   shows that direct interventions by subordinates (outcome control and assertiveness) positively

413   affect the fairness behaviours of their managers in the evaluation process. Therefore, while

414   these three generative forces had a direct causal effect on the participants' perceptions of

415   justice, they also had an indirect effect through providing the condition for the managers to be

416   fair in their appraisal (see Model 2). This reality was different for those in the Islamic context,

417   where the process of causality appeared to operate normally, with no emphasis on the

418   participants' hard work or the influence of their elite position.

419   ------------------------

420   Insert Model 2 about here

421   ----------------------

422   Similarly, even though stereotypes, politics and negative media representation had a

423   direct causal effect on the participants' perceptions of justice, the indirect effect of these

424   causal mechanisms came from providing the condition for the managers to act unfairly during

425 the appraisal process (see Model 3). This is while the context remained as the main

426 generative force for all these causal mechanisms to operate, as the participants' negative

427 perceptions of justice were limited to those in the Western context.

428   -----------------------

429   Insert Model 3 about here

430   ----------------------

431   Retroduction was a vital stage of data analysis. Not only did this approach help to

432 identify the generative forces and conditions for the causal mechanisms to operate and take

433 effect, but more importantly it made it possible to see the direct and indirect roles of these

434 forces.

435   The final stages in the model discuss the targets and agents in the attributions

436 extracted, and the causal dimensions.

437 *Coding targets and agents & Causal dimensions*

438   This stage identifies who/what causes the outcome, and who/what is affected by it

439 (Silvester, 2004). An agent is defined as 'the person, group or entity nominated in the cause

440 of the attribution', while a target is 'the person, group or entity which is mentioned in the

441 outcome of the attribution' (Silvester, 2004, p. 232). In this study, the targets were Muslims

442 (Speaker, Muslim Colleagues and Muslims as a social group), while the agents were more

443 varied, including the speaker (e.g. hard work), manager (e.g. application of justice constructs),

444 the media (e.g. media representation, news, stereotypes) and politicians (e.g. political

445 instability in the Middle East, Brexit, terrorist events).

446   The last stage in the model concerns the categorisation of the causal mechanisms

447 identified from the attributions into the six aforementioned causal dimensions, internal-

448　external-situational-relational, stable-unstable, global-specific, personal-universal-group,

449　controllable-uncontrollable and contextual-general. The focus of attributional scholars on

450　causal dimensions has led to some profound limitations which have been criticised, as

451　research has focused on quantifying the attributions into causal dimensions, while ignoring

452　the richness of qualitative data in describing and explaining those attributions (Silvester, 2004;

453　Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). The causal dimensions are crucial in helping researchers

454　understand the characteristics of the causal mechanisms, and thus suggestions can be made

455　regarding the implications required to control and influence these mechanisms and their

456　outcomes (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958). Therefore, when scholars use attributional

457　dimensions, they should utilise the richness of qualitative data to provide more in-depth

458　explanations of the dimensions found. For example, rather than saying that a particular causal

459　mechanism is unstable and uncontrollable, it would be more interesting and beneficial to

460　understand *why* it is described in that way.

461　　　Here, these dimensions are discussed from a more qualitative perspective, using

462　examples[1] from this study to explain the value of this approach in understanding social reality.

463　For instance, managers' positive application of justice constructs was external to participants,

464　as this causal mechanism was related to the behaviours of managers. Yet, it also appeared to

465　be situational and relational, when the negative experiences stemmed from specific situations

466　that led to negative relationships with their managers, resulting in unfair appraisal outcomes.

467　For example, despite exceeding the appraisal objectives, one of the participants who had

468　negative experiences attributed his unfair appraisal outcome to a negative interpersonal

469　relationship with his line manager, against whom he had an HR case open due to verbal racial

470　abuse in a specific situation. In some instances, this causal mechanism appeared to be

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[1] Since this study was concerned with exploring the reality of social actors and its causal mechanisms, attributional dimensions were not the main focus; however, some examples were used to illustrate how these dimensions can be employed and explained in future research using the richness of qualitative data.

471 unstable, particularly when some participants had positive and then negative experiences, or

472 vice versa. It was specific in its effect, causing either positive or negative perceptions of

473 justice, but it appeared to be universal when it was related to positive perceptions or occurred

474 in the Islamic context. In contrast, in Western banks, it appeared to be either personal or

475 group, when it pertained to negative perceptions due to negative workplace attitudes against

476 the participants, or Muslims, as a social group. A manager's application of justice constructs

477 was predominantly controllable due to the privilege of power accorded by the participants'

478 elite positions, which enabled them to control the fairness of the appraisal process. Their

479 ability to work harder than their colleagues to ensure they got what they believed to be a fair

480 appraisal was also a factor. The appraisal outcome was uncontrollable at early stages in their

481 career, and some participants attributed their or their Muslim colleagues' negative

482 experiences of justice to their lack of control and assertiveness during the performance

483 appraisal process at that time. Finally, hard work and elite positions were contextual causal

484 mechanisms, as they emerged mainly in the Western context, while in the Islamic context

485 causality appeared to operationalise naturally.

486   Negative stereotypes, politics and media misrepresentation appeared to share similar

487 attributional dimensions. These causal mechanisms were external, as they originated outside

488 the participants. Interestingly, they could be unstable and personal when the participants

489 spoke about their own experiences, which have changed over time, while they appeared to be

490 stable and group when the participants spoke about the impact on the whole social group in

491 the workplace. This is evident from our extensive data, particularly the systematic review

492 which noted an ongoing negative impact of these causal mechanisms on workplace

493 discrimination against Muslims over the period of the review (2001-2019). Similarly, the

494 impact of these mechanisms was likely to be controllable when participants spoke about their

495 own experiences, with the influence of their hard work and elite positions. Yet, the impact

496 appeared to be uncontrollable at earlier stages in their career, and thus members of this social

497 group in lower positions in the organisational hierarchy were more likely to face challenges

498 because of lower levels of control over the effect of these mechanisms. Finally, these three

499 causal mechanisms were contextual, as they emerged solely from those who worked for

500 Western banks.

Conclusion and implications

502 Understanding the underlying structure of the perceptions and experiences of social

503 actors in organisational research is indeed complex. Organisational scholars should adopt

504 new and sophisticated tools in their research to enable them to see these perceptions and

505 experiences through different lenses. The aim of this paper has been to develop an integrative

506 model that explains how integration of the two epistemological positions of critical realism

507 and attribution theory can help qualitative organisational researchers better understand the

508 reality of social actors, and this is a novel contribution to qualitative research methodology in

509 organisations. The paper has discussed how this model provided a more sophisticated

510 perspective on social reality. In addition, it has addressed a significant limitation in

511 organisational qualitative research methodology when it comes to providing a clear

512 application of the critical realism analysis framework in qualitative research within

513 organisational contexts. It has explained in detail how all stages of the framework are used,

514 from the early stages of reviewing the literature to analysing the data. Contemporary research

515 on Muslims' perceptions of organisational justice during the process of performance

516 appraisal in UK Western and Islamic banks has been utilised to illustrate in detail the

517 application of the model. The discussion has shown that the approaches complemented each

518 other, adding more sophisticated perspectives of causality. Attribution analysis has assisted in

519 providing a systematic identification of social phenomena and their causal mechanisms,

520 highlighted who/what was responsible for and affected by these mechanisms, and indicated

521 the characteristics of those mechanisms. Critical realism has helped in describing causes and

522 effects using theoretical concepts, and distinguished between the causal mechanisms to show

523 which ones had a direct impact on justice perceptions, and which had indirect impact by

524 providing the necessary conditions for other causal mechanisms to operate.

525 The study of the organisational justice perceptions of Muslim professionals in elite

526 managerial positions has highlighted the role organisational context and line managers can

527 play in driving positive perceptions of minority groups. Organisations should therefore ensure

528 that line managers receive sufficient training in applying and complying with organisational

529 justice rules throughout the process of performance appraisal (Skarlicki and Latham, 2005).

530 Managers should also identify clear objectives and assessment criteria and be committed to

531 reviewing them with their subordinates at fixed intervals (Hartmann and Slapničar, 2009;

532 Hopwood, 1972; Lau and Buckland, 2001). Additionally, managers should be aware that their

533 behaviour at any point of the appraisal process can influence subordinates' sense-making and

534 reflects on subordinates' perception of justice, as well as on their attitudes and behaviour.

535 Evidence shows that minority groups receive positive feedback, yet afterwards they

536 experience negative treatment that leads to changes in their initial perceptions, resulting in

537 negative work outcomes (Bullis and Bach, 1989a; 1989b). Moreover, managers should use all

538 available sources of data to sufficiently familiarise themselves with the quantity and quality

539 of their subordinates' work, and provide adequate and consistent feedback, making sure that

540 they identify key areas for improvement at specific intervals throughout the appraisal cycle

541 (Pichler, 2012).

542 During the appraisal process, subordinates' voices (Folger and Konovsky, 1989) can

543 also improve perceptions of justice by providing the opportunity to participate in setting

544 appraisal objectives, discussing, debating and agreeing on their objectives and assessment

545 criteria. Managers should be trained in involving their subordinates in the performance

546 appraisal process, particularly those who are at the lower levels of the organisational

547 hierarchy and might not have the confidence to share their opinions. Not only would

548 performance systems based on participation, adequate notice, evaluation and feedback

549 improve perceptions of justice, but these systems can also build trust in the organisation as a

550 whole (Chory and Hubbell, 2008; Ertürk, 2007; Wiemann *et al.,* 2018).

551   Overall, this paper serves as a showcase for the importance of applying critical

552 realism and attribution analysis in organisational research for qualitative organisational

553 scholars.

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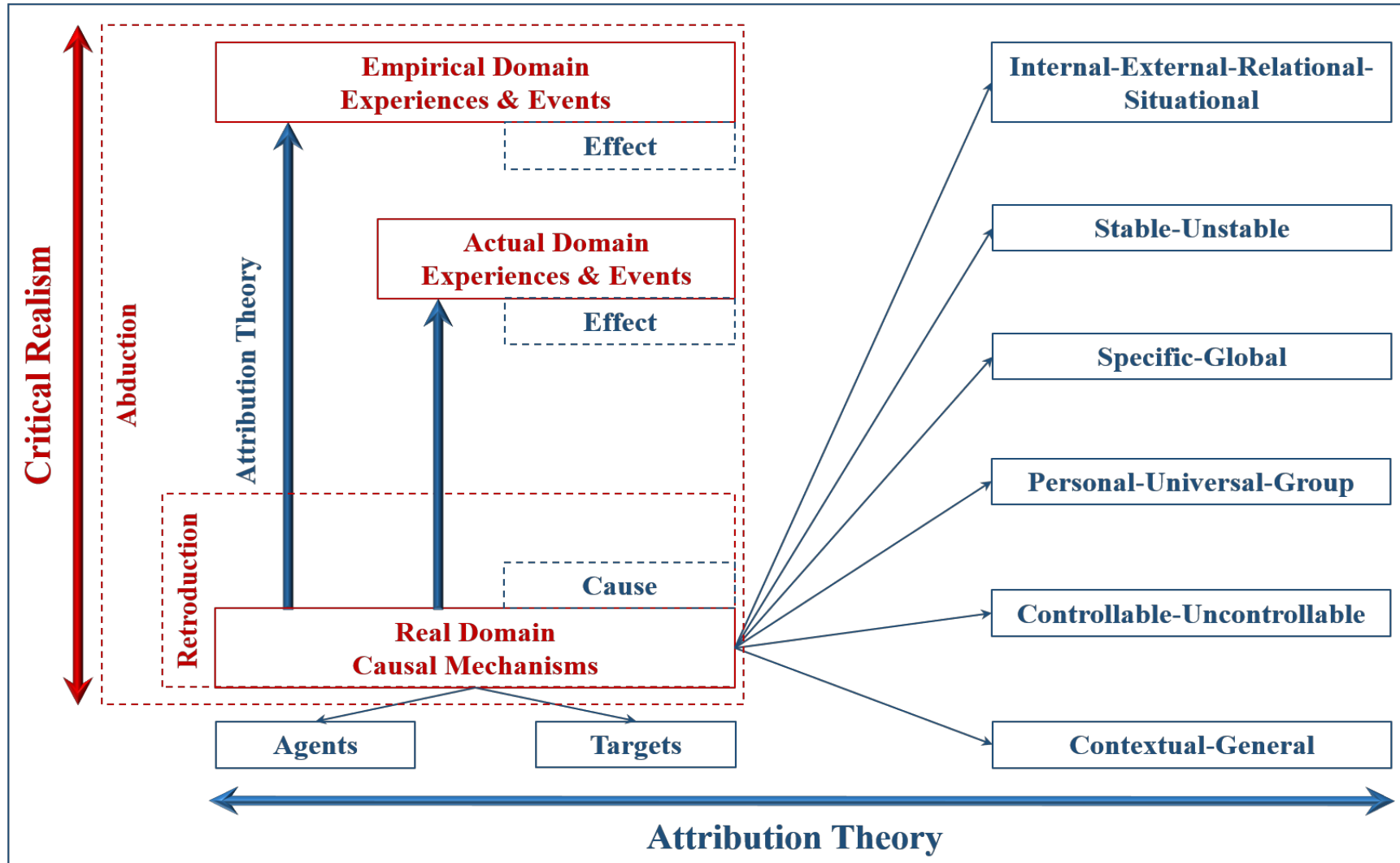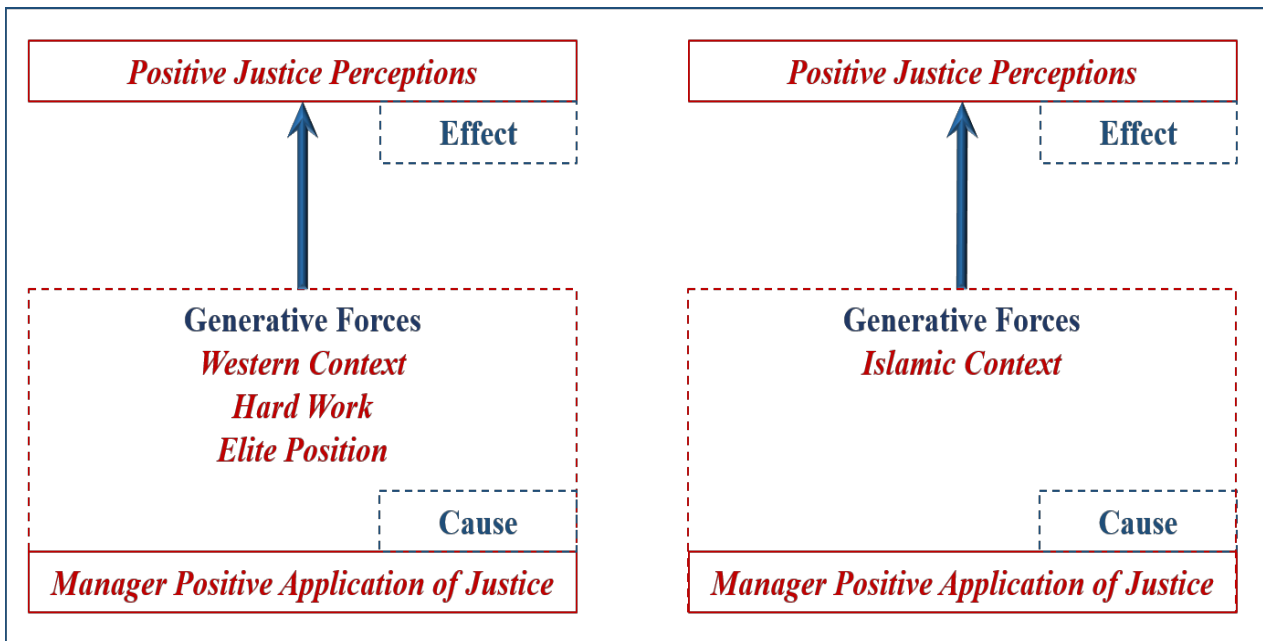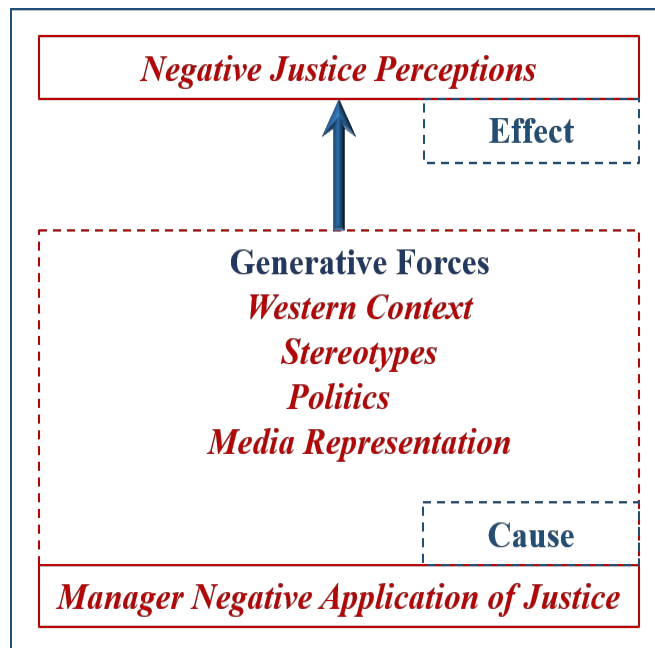804   pp. 159-175.

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Model 1. An Integrative Model of the Analytical Frameworks of Critical Realism and Attribution Theory

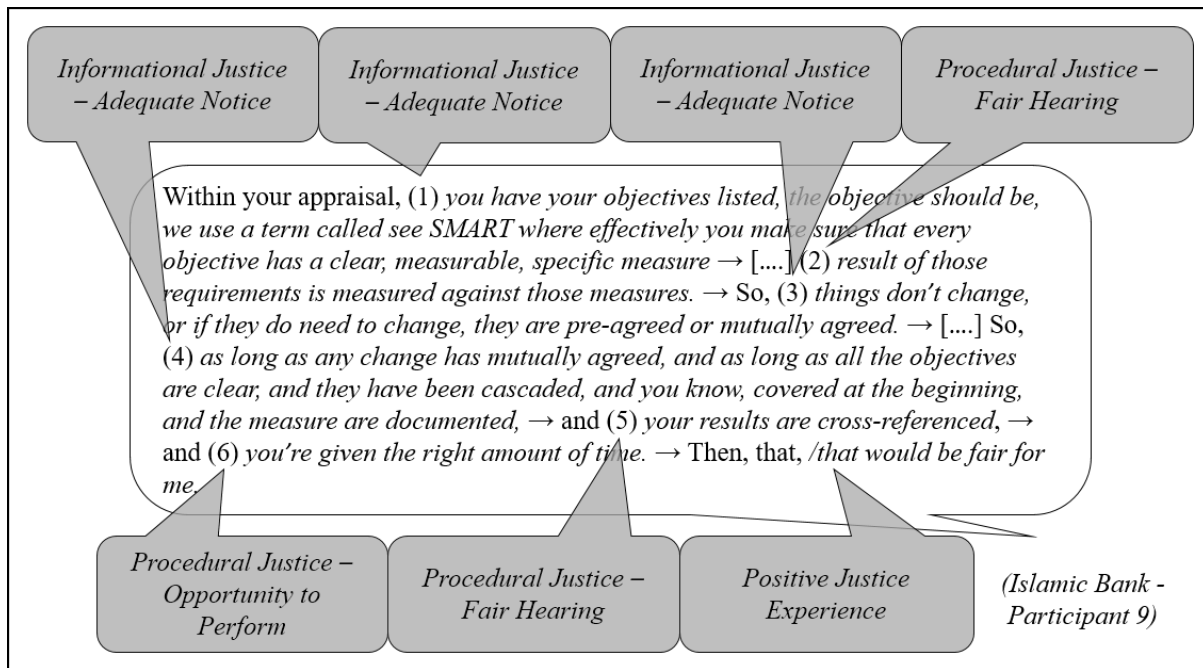**Model 2.** Retroduction of Positive Justice Perceptions

Positive Justice Perceptions	Positive Justice Perceptions
Effect	Effect
Generative Forces *Western Context* *Hard Work* *Elite Position*	Generative Forces *Islamic Context*
Cause	Cause
Manager Positive Application of Justice	*Manager Positive Application of Justice*

Model 3. Retroduction of Negative Justice Perceptions

Negative Justice Perceptions

Effect

Generative Forces
Western Context
Stereotypes
Politics
Media Representation

Cause

Manager Negative Application of Justice

Figure 1. Abduction in Attribution Coding

Table 1. Main Attributions of Justice Perceptions

Cause of justice perceptions	Western banks		The Islamic bank	
	# of mentions	Coverage	# of mentions	Coverage
Manager positive application of justice	52	6	75	5
Hard work	10	6	3	1
Manager negative application of justice	17	3	0	0
Macro-environment	16	3	0	0
Elite Positions	3	3	0	0

Note. The coverage indicates how many participants attributed their justice perceptions to these causes. The macro-environment includes stereotypes, negative media representation of Muslims, and politics.