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Attribution theory: untangling the relationship between management and workers

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Abstract

Attribution theory deals with how and why people form an opinion about the reasons for an event or observation (Winkler 2010). This theory is based on the idea that perception is the foundation of human understanding, sensemaking, and behaviour. This theory claims that people develop explanations for the behaviours of others, similarly to how scientists try to understand the world. The theory asserts that people's opinions are formed based on how they perceive the behaviour and the reality surrounding it. This explanation, the attribution, is based on how the observing person perceives a cause for the actor's behaviour.

Keywords

relationship, between, untangling, management, workers, theory, attribution

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The first judgment that people make when they observe a behaviour is whether the behaviour was caused by internal or external reasons - by the person, or by something outside the person. An observer will be more inclined to make such a judgement if the observed person's act affects their own welfare.

Since many events in a person's workplace affect their welfare, it is a suitable theory to use when studying workers. As this is my area of research, I will give examples from the relationship between management and workers to illustrate the theory.

The model of Attribution Theory

Attribution theory has developed a model that elucidates three main parts of the attribution: (1) the attribution's antecedents, (2) the attribution itself, and (3) the attribution's consequences. This is described in Figure 1 (Kelley & Michela 1980, p. 459).

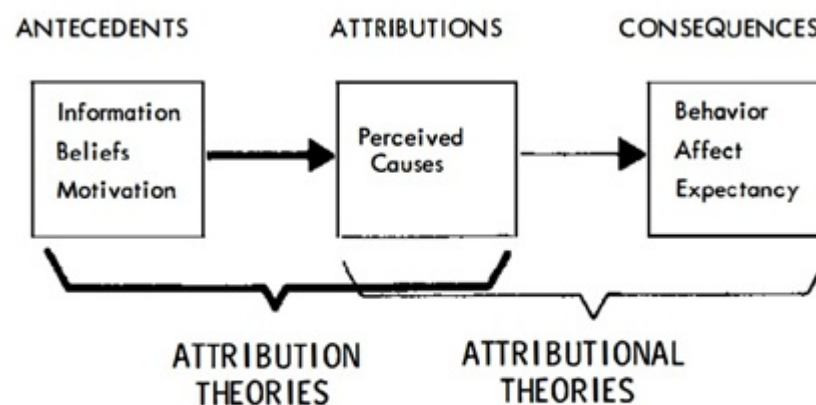


Figure 1. General model of the attribution field

Antecedents of attribution

People make an attribution for someone's behaviour, if the behaviour clearly has unusual reasons. In other words, people would not make an attribution for behaviour that seems normal, acceptable, expected, or culturally correct.

Information

The information that the attributor has about the action of the actor and about the actions' effects make a difference to the attribution. The information is used to make attribution depending on how *distinct* it is, how *consistent* it is, and how it fits with *consensus* (how the behaviour is seen by most people).

A *distinct* behaviour is only observed in one situation, as opposed to different situations. For example, distinct behaviour is displayed by a person who is only rude to one co-worker, as opposed to a person who is rude to various co-workers, a supervisor, and some customers. The less distinct the behaviour, the more likely it is to be attributed to *internal* causes.

A *consistent* behaviour is displayed in the same situation, but repeatedly over time. For example, a person who is late for work often displays consistent tardiness. The more consistent the behaviour, the more likely it is to be attributed to *internal* causes.

Finally, the way a person behaves in comparison with other people in the same situation is the degree of *consensus* of their behaviour. For example, most people in Australia wait in line patiently until their turn arrives. A person who tries to cut in line, or ignores the line, will display behaviour outside of this consensus. When such behaviour is displayed, people make an attribution to the actor's motives.

People also tend to attribute an intention that is similar in its *magnitude* to the effect. For example, if the effect of an act was detrimental, the intention attributed to the actor will also be great. In addition, the intention will be attributed based on the effect at that specific time – even if other actions preceded it.

Belief

Typically people have formed beliefs about what attribution to make (internal or external) to certain causes and certain effects. For example, in general, people tend to attribute success internally (particularly one's own success, but others' success as well). Failure is attributed differently: self-failure is usually attributed to external causes, but the failures of others can be attributed to internal reasons – as a way to protect ourselves from the thought of potential similar failure (‘It would not happen to me’).

When a result is unexpected, it is attributed to external causes. When it is expected – to internal.

People also tend to discount people's motivation to do something, if the act was also imposed by external circumstances. For example, if a person helps someone, they can be attributed good will. But if the person is helping, and there is a reward for the help – people will believe that at least partially, the reward was a cause of their help.

People also believe in symmetry between cause and effect - when the effect is small, people tend to believe only a small set of causes was responsible. When the effect is great, a combination of causes is believed to be necessary.

People not only take in information that is consistent with their beliefs, but their beliefs also affect the way information is processed.

Motivation

People's motive determine *when* they will be motivated to make attribution, and if they will favour one attribution over another.

When the perceiver is dependent on the observed in some way, the perceiver will be motivated to make attributions to their behaviour. In other words, when we depend on someone, we want to understand them better.

Attribution

When people observe behaviour, they interpret the causes they perceive for the behaviour in a sequence of information until they make an attribution. Then, they usually reinforce that attribution with additional information. If additional information contradicts their initial attribution, they ignore it. One might wonder, for how long? The jury is still out. This explains why the first impression is the most important one - people take a while to change their perceptions.

Actor versus observer

People tend to attribute less to themselves than they attribute to others - we believe that we are less responsible for our actions, but we expect others to be more responsible for theirs. Compassion and empathy are relevant here. When people are instructed to empathise with the observed person, they make more external attributions.

Ego causes actors to attribute success to disposition (internally) and failure to situation (externally). When the ego is not a part of the scenario, the attribution pattern changes.

Consequences of attribution

Managers who observe their workers tend to develop less trust in them. Since we attribute the causes of the behaviours of others to internal reasons, we tend to think that anything that they do that is less than perfect is by their own fault. We then trust them less.

If we add external rewards to voluntary behaviour, the actor tends to be less motivated to do it.

When an action has a moral outcome, the attributor is more interested in the *intention* of the actor, than in the outcome.

People prefer to help those who they believe are not to blame for their situation. So, if they are attributed to be responsible for their difficulty, they are less likely to be helped.

References and links

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