4
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST AND ATTRIBUTIONS
A Levels-of-Analysis Perspective
Edward Tomlinson and Luke Langlinais

Introduction
Trust is a psychological state reflecting the willingness to be vulnerable to another based on confident positive expectations (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). In contrast, an attribution is a psychological judgment regarding the cause of a behavior or event (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Researchers have begun to explore how trust (i.e., a psychological state) is related to attributions (as psychological judgments) (e.g., Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009), and this chapter is intended to continue developing an understanding of this connection. Because both trust and attributions are psychological phenomena, they ultimately originate at the individual level. However, it has been recognized that both trust and attributions can be situated in contexts that influence one’s psychological experience (Fulmer, 2018). One of the most salient contexts is an interpersonal relationship, and since relationship partners both influence and are influenced by one another (Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2015; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988), this context has been fertile ground for research on how trust and attributions are related (for a recent review, see Tomlinson, 2018). However, scholars have recently called for more research to examine how this relationship is affected when considering phenomena at different levels of analysis (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Therefore, this chapter will approach the trust-attribution relationship from a levels-of-analysis perspective. The term “levels-of-analysis” should be understood to encompass constructs that cross levels (e.g., individual team member attributions shaping team-level trust) or incorporate constructs at one level relating to other constructs at multiple levels (Fulmer, 2018).

Toward that end, this chapter is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief summary of the extant research on the relationship between trust and attributions
to establish the basic foundation for our analysis. As already stated, both trust and attributions are ultimately ‘individual’ in nature. Thus, it is no surprise that the bulk of research on this relation has not involved a levels-of-analysis perspective. However, pursuing the possibility that psychological phenomena can be influenced by various social influences (Deutsch & Krauss, 1965) entails a careful consideration of how levels of analysis might inform and enrich our basic foundation. Therefore, we will proceed to review relevant research incorporating a levels-of-analysis perspective. In particular, we will examine multi- and cross-level research on attributions. Finally, we will close with observations and recommendations for subsequent research on how the trust–attribution nexus can be explored beyond the virtually exclusive focus on the individual level that has characterized prior work.

The Relationship Between Trust and Attributions

Most trust researchers regard the formal study of trust to have begun with a publication by Morton Deutsch (1958). Coincidentally, the origin of the formal study of attributions is generally credited to Fritz Heider in the same year (1958). Over the next decade, a variety of specific theories regarding the attribution process were developed. In reviewing some of this work, Kelley (1967) asserted that “Attribution theory has important statements to make about the conditions and dilemmas [of establishing trust in interpersonal relationships]” (p. 235). In a much later review of trust research, Kramer (1999) observed that

interaction histories [between actor and observer] give decision makers information that is useful in assessing others’ dispositions, intentions, and motives. This information, in turn, provides a basis for drawing inferences regarding their trustworthiness and for making predictions about their future behavior.

(p. 575)

Fortunately, we have a body of theoretical and empirical research that has explored the relationship between trust and attributions.

To frame our analysis, we draw upon the Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) model of trust. This model specifies that trust (as the willingness to be vulnerable to a trustee) is a joint function of both trustee and trustor characteristics. Specifically, trust is predicted by the trustor’s perception of the trustee’s trustworthiness, as well as by the trustor’s propensity to trust. Trustworthiness is composed of three dimensions: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability refers to situation-specific or task-based competence. Integrity considers the consistency of the trustee’s actions and the match of these actions with the trustor’s values. Benevolence accounts for caring and good intentions. The outcome of trust is risk taking in the relationship
where the trustor moves from being willing to be vulnerable to actually engaging in vulnerability); this relationship is moderated by perceived risk. Finally, the outcome of risk taking in the relationship is assessed by the trustor in comparison to what was anticipated, and a feedback loop in the model is designated to represent the updated perceptions of trustworthiness for consideration in subsequent trust-relevant interactions. Notably, this model was specifically designed to accommodate a levels-of-analysis perspective (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

In terms of the attribution process, we will draw primarily from Weiner’s (1986) attribution theory. Interestingly, this was originally proposed as an intrapersonal theory (e.g., how the attributions individuals make for their own performance affects their subsequent motivation, emotions, and behavior), and later expanded to the case where observers make attributions for the causes of an actor’s behavior. Regardless, the theory indicates that an outcome (a behavior, an event) prompts individuals to search for its cause. Weiner’s theory posits that the resulting causal ascriptions (whatever they may be) will be meaningfully analyzed along three distinct dimensions. First, locus of causality indicates the attributor’s conclusion on the degree to which the cause is deemed internal to the actor or external (e.g., another person, or some situational factor). The second dimension is controllability, which indicates the attributor’s conclusion regarding how much control an actor had over the cause of an outcome; even though an outcome might be internal, it might not be controllable (e.g., a heart attack). Finally, stability indicates the attributor’s conclusion regarding how temporary or permanent the cause of an outcome is. Weiner’s theory predicts that this dimensional analysis leads to specific emotional reactions and subsequent behavioral reactions (with the latter based on conclusions regarding stability).

Returning to the quotes above from researchers contemplating a relationship between trust and attributions, we can now begin to formulate a more detailed connection. Because an attribution is a suspected or inferred cause of a behavior or event, our initial analysis of the trust–attribution nexus indicates attributions are only relevant after an outcome in a trust-relevant episode. That is, the outcome (positive or negative) will be analyzed to determine its cause (i.e., the trustee’s ability, benevolence, integrity, or some cause unrelated to the trustee; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). The trustee’s perceived ability, benevolence, and/or integrity may be updated as a result of this attribution process, with a corresponding effect on subsequent trust. This process is depicted in Figure 4.1.

This specific theoretical reasoning is generally consistent with an early study by Strickland (1958) finding that when a subordinate’s trustworthy behavior was regarded by a supervisor as internal (i.e., an indication of the subordinate’s actual motives), this led to more trust. However, if the same behavior was attributed to an external cause (i.e., the supervisor’s close monitoring), then this led to lower trust. In a fascinating twist, the results in this experiment were produced not by any actual difference among subordinates’ work performance; they were solely due to attributions the supervisors made for subordinate behavior driven by differences in
how much the supervisors were able to monitor their subordinates. Many subsequent studies at the individual level are consistent with the posited linkage shown in Figure 4.1, whereby trust eventually leads to an outcome that is subjected to attributional analysis; consequently, trustworthiness perceptions are updated for a subsequent trust-relevant episode (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). The attribution process is key to understanding how and why perceptions of trustworthiness are revised. The accuracy and characteristics of the attributions made regarding why a certain outcome occurred will affect future decisions regarding trust.

Variations on this initial analysis have also appeared in the extant literature. For example, a stream of research by Kim and his colleagues (Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004) indicates that (1) outcomes attributed to different forms of trustworthiness (ability versus integrity) appear to have important implications for subsequent attributional analysis and, hence, updated trustworthiness and trust, and (2) one does not need to have a personal trust-relevant interaction with the trustee prior to drawing attributions regarding an outcome to determine trustworthiness and trust (i.e., one can draw from a vicarious instead of first-hand experience).

**Literature Review**

Whereas the prior section outlined the basic theory and empirical research on the relationship between trust and attributions at the individual level, this section delves into research that has expanded the frontier to include a levels-of-analysis perspective. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide a summary of the reviewed literature and ideas for future research.
While trust research has been conducted at higher levels, studies including attributions at higher levels have not been typical in this literature (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). More directly to the point of this chapter, we believe that attribution theories may serve as a useful lens to apply in multilevel trust research. Other theorists have posited the relevance of attributions in higher-level trust research (e.g., Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Janowicz-Panjaitan & Krishnan, 2009), and the extant trust literature has already discussed how trust itself manifests at higher levels of analysis (e.g., De Jong & Dirks, 2012). However, we are unaware of any extant empirical trust research that has incorporated attributions in multi- or cross-level studies.

Nonetheless, the broader literature on attribution theory (i.e., non-trust research) has incorporated a levels-of-analysis perspective (Hewstone, 1989). We chose to carefully review this work for insights it may have for further illuminating

### TABLE 4.1 Attributions as a predictor – multilevel research involving attribution theories and suggested opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Potential attribution–trust research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanders et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Distinctiveness and consistency attributions of the human resource management (HRM) system at the individual level (but not consensus at the department level) predicted individual-level affective commitment.</td>
<td>Investigate whether higher-level attribution measures lead to commitment due to the mediating effect of trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dithurbide et al. (2009)</td>
<td>Team-level stability attributions predict team perceptions of collective efficacy, while individual-level differences do not have a significant effect.</td>
<td>Team-level stability attributions of team performance in conjunction with unequivocal evidence of team success (objective performance) may enhance trust in the team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riolli and Sommer (2010)</td>
<td>Group-level attribution style had a significant effect on individual turnover.</td>
<td>Group attributional style might impact individual-level trust regardless of actual objective indicators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vlachos et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Managers’ unit-level genuine and self-serving CSR causal attributions affect individual-level genuine and self-serving CSR causal attributions; in turn, genuine attributions affect employee advocacy on behalf of the organization.</td>
<td>Investigate higher-level social influence processes on an employee’s attributions, such as the influence of important others that an employee trusts.</td>
</tr>
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levels-of-analysis research on the relationship between trust and attributions. In the review that follows, we organize the literature by specifying the empirical relationships among constructs, careful to note the level of each. We begin with research that has examined attributions as a predictor, and conclude with research that has examined attributions as an outcome.

### TABLE 4.2 Attributions as an outcome – multilevel research involving attribution theories and suggested opportunities

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<td>Sherman and Kim (2005)</td>
<td>Team-level performance affects individual-level internal attributions, but this effect is qualified by individual self-affirmation (i.e., sense of self-worth independent of team membership).</td>
<td>Investigate whether individuals on a failing team experience a self-serving bias and place greater blame on their team, hence negatively affecting team trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherpitel et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Aggregated individual and socio-cultural context factors influence the relationship between individual perceptions/behaviors and that individual’s causal attributions for his/her outcome.</td>
<td>Investigate macro-contextual variables that may influence the attribution–trust relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chow and Feltz (2008)</td>
<td>Individual perceptions of team success or failure as well as individual and aggregated collective efficacy beliefs were significant predictors of team attribution dimensions.</td>
<td>Investigate the effect of attribution re-training on the process of making accurate attributions of and trust judgments in teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vlachos et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Unit-level perceptions of charismatic leadership affect individual-level (internal versus external) attributions, which impact job satisfaction.</td>
<td>Examine the effect of unit-level perceptions of manager trustworthiness on employees’ attributions regarding organizational strategic activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van De Voorde and Beijer (2015)</td>
<td>The unit-level effect of high-performance work systems influences individual-level human resource attributions.</td>
<td>Investigate whether trust mediates the relationship between attributions regarding HR programs and employee outcomes (such as organizational commitment and job strain).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders and Yang (2016)</td>
<td>Unit-level understanding of high-commitment human resource management leads to individual-level attributions and outcomes.</td>
<td>Investigate how trust in relation to the communication of organizational systems may influence attributions made about those systems and management’s motivations.</td>
</tr>
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We now turn to the empirical research that has used a levels-of-analysis approach with attributions as the predictor variable. A brief summary of each article will be provided followed by insights into what these cross-level studies mean in terms of attribution theory and recommendations on how they may inspire future work on the attribution–trust relationship.

Distinctiveness and consistency attributions of the human resource management (HRM) system at the individual level (but not consensus at the department level) predicted individual-level affective commitment. Sanders, Dorenbosch, and de Reuver (2008) developed and tested a model based on earlier conceptual work by Bowen and Ostroff (2004).

Bowen and Ostroff proposed a model to conceptualize the “strength” of a human resource management (HRM) system regarding how effectively information is communicated within an organization (i.e., creating a strong situation, a situation where there is a consistent understanding and response by individuals). Bowen and Ostroff referred to Kelley’s (1967) covariation model to advance propositions on how employees use distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus information to determine HRM system strength. (Kelley’s covariation model posits that individuals make decisions regarding locus of causality based on others’ behavior and seek information, based on multiple observations, to confirm or refute their judgments. We discuss Kelley’s model more completely in the final section of the chapter.) In this manner, Bowen and Ostroff put forth a model to describe how individual-level psychological processes (i.e., attributions) emerge to form a strong (i.e., shared) organizational climate at the aggregate level. For example, these authors claimed that employees determine the distinctiveness of an HRM system by considering cues like relevance and legitimacy of authority.

Sanders et al. (2008) relied on this framework and created a model where distinctiveness was operationalized by relevance (i.e., employees’ approval of HRM practices) and legitimacy of authority (i.e., employees’ evaluation of managers’ performance), consistency was operationalized as employees’ within-respondent agreement on a measure of high-commitment HRM practices, and consensus was operationalized by the level of agreement on the same measure of high-commitment HRM practices between the line manager and HR manager of each department.

We have strong reservations about the theoretical and empirical application of Kelley’s (1967) theory here, and we discuss these matters more fully in the final section of the chapter. For the moment, however, we point out that this is the earliest study on attributions as a predictor that attempted to conceptualize and measure an attribution construct at a higher level. Sanders et al. measured distinctiveness and consistency at the individual level, but consensus was measured at the department level. The argument that attributions can be meaningfully studied at higher (than the individual) levels was an important step forward in this stream of

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research and has been subsequently adopted by several other researchers. We also believe it would be useful to investigate whether higher-level attribution measures lead to commitment due to the mediating effect of trust.

*Team-level stability attributions predict team perceptions of collective efficacy, while individual-level differences do not have a significant effect.* Invoking Weiner’s (1986) attribution theory, Dithurbide, Sullivan, and Chow (2009) studied the relationship between team-referent attributions, team performance, and collective efficacy beliefs in competitive coed recreational volleyball teams. Their findings indicated that both objective and subjective measures of team performance significantly predict collective efficacy. Team attributions of stability were measured with the Causal Dimension Scale for Teams (CDS-T) (Greenlees, Lane, Thelwell, Holder, & Hobson, 2005), and were also a significant predictor of collective efficacy (supporting the reverse causal order suggested by Chow and Feltz, 2008, which found that both individual and aggregated collective efficacy predicted team control attributions). This relationship was qualified such that when objective performance was high, higher stability attributions were related to higher subsequent collective efficacy. In other words, “for teams with better performance, more stable team-referent attributions resulted in higher subsequent collective efficacy beliefs” (p. 502). Individual-level variables were not hypothesized, but age, sex, and experience were analyzed post hoc. None of the individual-level variables predicted collective efficacy, and level-two tests provided further evidence that variance was explained at the team level.

How might this apply to the attribution–trust relationship? While trust is not used in the definition of collective efficacy, the idea of multiple individuals believing in their team’s ability to achieve goals definitely implies a certain level of trustworthiness and, hence, trust. Stability attributions were significantly related to team collective efficacy when objective performance was high. Stable attributions of team performance in conjunction with unequivocal evidence of team success (objective performance) likely enhance trust in the team, which would in turn contribute to collective efficacy beliefs.

*Group-level attribution style had a significant effect on individual turnover.* Riolli and Sommer (2010) argued and presented evidence indicating that attributional styles can be a group-level phenomenon. Drawing from the theoretical and scale development work of Kent and Martinko (1995), Riolli and Sommer define group attributional style as, “the group’s habitual and collective manner of explaining the causes of bad and good events happening to them” (2010, p. 55). They note that attributional style is a cognitive process rather than an affective disposition, such as positive and negative affectivity. The major implication is that as members of a group interact, they collectively develop schema regarding the causes of their experiences, which results in a group-level phenomenon. The study also indicated that group attributional style influences individual turnover behavior, even after controlling for related variables such as group potency and social identity. Further, groups with optimistic attribution styles experienced significantly less turnover.
at the individual level than groups with pessimistic attribution styles (despite the fact that there were no between-group differences in actual performance). This study used the Group Attributional Style Questionnaire (Kent & Martinko, 1995).

For trust research, these findings may imply that group attributional style might also impact individual-level trust (e.g., toward managers, the organization) regardless of actual objective indicators. To the extent that groups develop a chronically optimistic or pessimistic attribution style, individuals’ trust may reflect shared sense-making and have downstream effects on turnover (or other variables such as performance, etc.).

Managers’ unit-level genuine and self-serving CSR causal attributions affect individual-level genuine and self-serving CSR causal attributions; in turn, genuine attributions affect employee advocacy on behalf of the organization. Vlachos, Panagopoulos, Bachrach, and Morgeson (2017) develop a multilevel social influence theory of how corporate social responsibility (CSR) affects employees. Corporate social responsibility is “a company’s discretionary involvement in business practices that appear to further economic, societal, and environmental well-being” (Vlachos, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2013, p. 577). This study investigates the effect of managers’ attributions for CSR on employee attributions. Employee attributions were hypothesized to predict employee advocacy on behalf of the organization. This line of reasoning was supported for genuine attributions (i.e., CSR initiatives were regarded as sincere efforts by the organization); while managers’ self-serving attributions (i.e., that the organization was engaging in CSR for self-serving purposes) affected employees’ self-serving attributions, this effect was not moderated by manager tenure, and employee self-serving attributions did not relate to employee advocacy. Notably, this was the only study we found in this section that controlled for trust in the manager. The results offer practical implications for managers to convey their genuine motives. The authors also encourage an “inside-out” approach, where employees are seen and treated as key stakeholders in the organization.

These findings may influence attribution–trust research by encouraging deeper investigation of social influence processes on an employee’s attributions, such as the influence of important others that an employee trusts. Organizations should seek out leaders that employees can trust to have genuine motives for their prosocial behavior.

**Attributions as an Outcome**

Team-level performance affects individual-level internal attributions, but this effect is qualified by individual self-affirmation (i.e., sense of self-worth independent of team membership). This article by Sherman and Kim (2005) centers on the hedonic bias (i.e., the tendency for winners to make more internal attributions than losers) noted in a litany of prior attribution research. The self-serving bias is a specific case of the general hedonic bias and refers to the tendency of individuals to attribute their successes to internal factors and their failures to external factors (Miller &
Notably, when attached to a group, a similar phenomenon has been observed, whereby individuals attribute group success to themselves personally, and group failure to more external (to the individual member) causes. However, it is also possible that individuals in groups might exhibit a group-serving bias, where the group’s successes are attributed more to the group’s internal factors than their failures. Sherman and Kim (2005) conducted two studies to examine the tendency for individuals in groups to make self- and group-serving causal attributions for success and failure. The results indicated that participants that received individually based self-affirmation exhibited significantly reduced self-serving and group-serving biases. This suggests that when individuals felt more secure about their self-image, they were less motivated to protect themselves or their team by making biased attributions for the cause of success or failure.

In terms of what this study means for a levels-of-analysis perspective in attribution theory, Sherman and Kim (2005) found that team-level performance (i.e., victory versus defeat) invoked a hedonic bias unless there was a self-affirmation that ostensibly reduced the psychological need for individuals to derive a sense of self-worth from team membership. These findings reveal that judgments about the group may be anchored to one’s self-image. This cognitive process where self- and group-serving judgments are invoked can be altered through self-affirmation by removing the psychological need to protect one’s self. They conclude, “Collective events (such as the victories and defeats of one’s group) affect feelings of self-worth, and individual events (such as self-affirmation) affect judgments about one’s group” (p. 118).

How might this apply to the attribution–trust relationship? The aforementioned article by Sherman and Kim (2005) can be used to inform future research questions in the attribution–trust relationship in a team setting. Sherman and Kim (2005) posited and found that self-concept anchored judgments about their group, leading to hedonic bias. That is, unless participants were affirmed by reflecting on their individually based values, both self-serving and group-serving biases moved in tandem (higher internal attributions for winning, lower internal attributions for losing). No effects were evident with respect to external attributions. However, it is possible that in some contexts, individuals on a failing team may experience a self-serving bias and place greater blame on their team (self-serving and hedonic bias might not always be in tandem); this would be expected to negatively affect team trust. One can also envision a scenario where a group-serving bias after a failure event may contribute to declining trust in an out-group. These possibilities should be explored.

Aggregated individual and socio-cultural context factors influence the relationship between individual perceptions/behaviors and that individual’s causal attributions for his/her outcome. Cherpitel et al. (2006) used data from two large-scale studies that spanned 15 countries and a 19-year period to investigate how aggregated (within-study) individual factors (e.g., average log volume of alcohol consumed prior to injury) and socio-cultural factors (e.g., per capita consumption of ethanol) affect
the causal attributions of emergency room patients’ beliefs that drinking alcohol is associated with their injuries. Their results suggest that individuals’ causal attribution of injury to drinking varies by aggregated individual drinking habits as well as typical drinking patterns within their particular society. Individuals that drink alcohol at least weekly are less likely than those that drink less frequently to attribute their injuries to drinking at low volumes. Interestingly, the frequent drinkers were more likely to attribute their injuries to drinking when they consumed alcohol at higher volumes. In addition, societies that had higher integration of alcohol consumption were less likely than those with low integration to attribute injuries to drinking when drinking at low levels, but more likely to make that attribution when drinking at high levels. There was surprisingly no predictive relationship between the time between individuals consuming their last drink and the occurrence of injury in whether or not alcohol was attributed as the cause.

In terms of what this study means for a levels-of-analysis perspective in attribution theory, Cherpitel et al. (2006) suggest that aggregated contextual variables within a major social category (e.g., ethnicity, region, culture, country) are associated with causal attributions. This adds further support to the notion that context can shape attributions in important ways (Hewstone, 1989).

How might this apply to the attribution–trust relationship? Future research exploring the attribution–trust relationship may consider investigating different macro-contextual variables that could have an influence. For example, organizational behavior research has found that Black employees are more likely to rate their managers lower in behavioral integrity (a dimension of trustworthiness) than non-Black employees (Simons, Friedman, Liu, & McLean Parks, 2007). While this study did not incorporate a levels-of-analysis perspective or include attributions, it is possible that Blacks (relative to other racial categories) tend to experience more cynicism and suspicion (Simons et al., 2007), and this may generate a more pessimistic attribution tendency (cf. Pettigrew, 1979) that reduces trustworthiness perceptions and trust in a specific referent. In this way, a major social category in which a team or individual finds themselves may serve as a strong force, unknownt to them, that affects their causal attributions and subsequent trust.

**Individual perceptions of team success or failure as well as individual and aggregated collective efficacy beliefs were significant predictors of team attribution dimensions.** Chow and Feltz (2008) invoked Bandura’s (1997) construct of collective efficacy, which captures a team’s shared belief in their ability to attain goals through their combined capabilities. This study utilized a cross-level framework based on Weiner’s (1986) attribution theory to explain the relationship between individual perceptions of success/failure and collective efficacy (both individually and at the team level) on team causal attribution dimensions.

From a levels-of-analysis standpoint, the cross-level framework accounts for both individual and team effects of collective efficacy. Individual subjective perceptions of team controllability attributions and team-level perceptions of collective efficacy were related to stability attributions. This suggests that the beliefs
held by individuals and the team regarding the team’s collective efficacy affect the attributions the team makes regarding their performance. Their findings also indicated that gender plays a moderating role in the collective efficacy and team controllability attribution relationship, such that teams of females demonstrated a stronger relationship between these variables compared to males. This indicates that females may have a unique perspective on their teams’ collective efficacy and attributions regarding team control. The authors surmise that this gender effect could be due to females having higher levels of emotional communication and feedback, which may strengthen their perceptions of team control. They draw from their results to recommend attribution retraining as a potentially promising intervention:

Attribution retraining focuses primarily on altering failure attributions that produce maladaptive behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Following a failure experience, individuals are taught to attribute the cause of performance to controllable factors rather than internal ability-oriented factors…. Thus, applied techniques directed at enhancing the collective efficacy beliefs of teams (e.g. modelling, verbal persuasion, team goal setting) may indirectly influence team control attributions.

(Chow & Feltz, 2008, p. 1187)

How might this apply to the attribution–trust relationship? The concept of attribution retraining may have significant application in trust research, specifically in the trust repair literature. For example, Hatzakis (2009) suggests that some individuals may have an attributional style reflecting a tendency to attribute the causes of negative outcomes to the shortcomings of others. This may lead to errors in judgment due to inaccurate perceptions of the extent of influence and control others have over specific outcomes. If this process generalizes to teams, and teams can be retrained in the process of making attributions, this may affect the level of trust that team members are willing to extend to their team. For instance, if a trust violation is regarded as having an unstable cause (i.e., unlikely to recur), versus stable, a team member may be more willing to place trust in the team again (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). If organizations were to train team members in the process of making accurate attributions (as opposed to unduly pessimistic attributions), this may enhance their trust judgments. We note, however, that attribution retraining research has focused on how dysfunctional attribution patterns at the intrapersonal level can become more constructive. We are unaware of any research in this area at other levels of analysis.

Unit-level perceptions of charismatic leadership affect individual-level (internal versus external) attributions, which impact job satisfaction. In their study on corporate social responsibility (CSR), Vlachos et al. (2013) examine how aggregated perceptions of charismatic leadership affect attributions that employees make about their organization’s motives for CSR activities, which in turn affect employee
job satisfaction. They essentially argue that middle managers are the “face” of the company to employees, such that how managers behave reflects the characteristics and motives of the organization itself. Intrinsic attributions capture the belief that CSR activity is values-driven (i.e., out of genuine concern), while extrinsic attributions capture the belief that engagement in CSR is simply for promotional purposes. Vlachos et al. (2013) used a sample of manufacturing employees and collected questionnaire data. They ultimately found that charismatic leadership in middle managers positively affects intrinsic attributions employees make regarding the organization’s CSR activities, and in turn, these attributions are positively related to their job satisfaction.

While this study focuses on charismatic leadership as the interpretive lens through which employees view their organization’s CSR activities, future research should consider trust in management. Charismatic leaders “stress self-sacrifice for the long-term good of the organization and/or the larger community” (Vlachos et al., 2013, p. 579). This bears a striking resemblance to perceptions of benevolence that individuals form when choosing to trust another individual. Future research on the attribution–trust nexus might examine the effect of unit-level perceptions of manager trustworthiness on employees’ attributions regarding organizational strategic activities. Further, parallel to Vlachos et al.’s recommendation to train managers to behave in a more charismatic fashion, training managers to exhibit more trustworthy behaviors may reap similar dividends. While we are not the first to suggest this implication, we are unaware of empirical research that actually tests this supposition.

The unit-level effect of high-performance work systems influences individual-level human resource attributions. High-performance work systems (HPWS) refers to a collection of human resource management practices specifically geared toward maximizing employee and organizational performance. Van De Voorde and Beijer (2015) used multilevel data to examine the effect of HPWS (at the work unit level) on individual-level human resource attributions (i.e., that HR practices are intended to enhance employee well-being or performance, respectively), ultimately leading to organizational commitment and job strain. The sample for this study consisted of line managers and their employees. Line managers reported on the extent to which HPWS practices were applied to their work unit employees, while employees responded to questions measuring their attributions, commitment, and job strain. The results indicated that work units with more employees covered by HPWS practices were positively associated with individual employees attributing the organization’s motives to increasing both employee well-being and performance. Well-being attributions, in turn, were related to higher organizational commitment and lower job strain; performance attributions were related to higher job strain.

Future attribution–trust research might investigate whether trust mediates the relationship between attributions regarding HR programs and employee outcomes (such as organizational commitment and job strain).
Unit-level understanding of high-commitment human resource management leads to individual-level attributions and outcomes. Topically, this study bears a striking resemblance to the Van De Voorde and Beijer (2015) study reviewed above. Sanders and Yang (2016) investigated whether unit-level high-commitment human resource management (HC-HRM; the European terminology for HPWS) is more effective when employees attribute it to the organization’s management (i.e., that HC-HRM practices are a strong signal of their management’s intent). In terms of Kelley’s (1967) covariation principle of attribution theory, attributing HC-HRM practices to managers should occur when distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus are high (cf. Sanders et al., 2008). Their results revealed that when unit-level HC-HRM practices are attributed as high in distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus, they are associated with higher employee affective commitment and innovative behavior.

As we mentioned earlier, we have strong reservations about this application of covariation theory and will elaborate on this matter in the final section. Nonetheless, future attribution–trust research might investigate how trust in relation to the communication of organizational systems may influence attributions made about those systems and management’s motivations. HC-HRM systems seemingly function on a reciprocal trust-based relationship between the organization’s management and its employees. Indeed, Sanders and Yang (2016) describe such systems in terms of a social exchange perspective and assert that “employees perceive HC-HRM as benevolence on the part of their employer” (p. 205). If an organization focuses on the development and maintenance of trust, it may serve as a conduit to better communication and more beneficial attributions.

Potential Contributions of Attribution Theories in Cross- and Multilevel Research on Trust

In this final section, we offer some integrative analysis and describe several important observations that we believe will be central to examining the attribution–trust relationship in cross- and multilevel research.

**Theoretical Considerations**

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Sherman and Kim (2005) did not invoke any particular attribution theory, while Riolli and Sommer (2010) cited several major attribution theories (Heider, 1958; Green & Mitchell, 1979; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1986). Group attributional style (Kent & Martinko, 1995) was incorporated by Riolli and Sommer (2010). The primary attribution theories invoked in the cross- and multilevel studies on attributions were Weiner’s attribution theory (Chow & Feltz, 2008; Dithurbide et al., 2009; Vlachos et al., 2017) and Kelley’s covariation theory of attributions (Sanders
et al., 2008; Sanders & Yang, 2016; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015; Vlachos et al., 2013, 2017).

Theoretical Concerns

As we mentioned earlier, we have serious concerns regarding how Kelley’s (1967) covariation theory has sometimes been invoked and applied in this stream of research. Kelley’s covariation theory was developed to explain how individuals rely on social information collected over time to test and confirm their causal attributions with respect to the locus of causality. Taking the example, “John laughs at the comedian,” Hewstone (1989) explains “this outcome could be caused by something in the person (John), the circumstances (e.g., the occasion in which the outcome occurred), the entity or stimulus (the comedian), or some combination of these factors” (p. 22). Kelley posited that observers would assess accumulated information regarding consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness to determine which source of the cause is most likely. In Kelley’s theory, consensus refers to how the effect varies across persons; consistency refers to how consistent the effect is over time and modality; and distinctiveness refers to how the stimulus is distinct from other stimuli. For ease of exposition, each of these factors is described as being high or low, and various profiles point to specific loci of causality. For example, an entity locus is indicated by a high degree of all three factors.

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) referred to this attribution theory when they developed propositions specifying that

an HRM system high in distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus should enhance clarity of interpretation in the setting, thereby allowing for similar ‘cognitive maps’ or ‘causal maps’ to develop among people, as well as to create an ‘influence situation’ whereby individuals yield to the message and understand the appropriate ways of behaving.

(p. 214, emphasis original)

Their paper proposed various characteristics of HRM that they viewed as illustrating each of Kelley’s factors. For example, they argued that distinctiveness is captured by information such as legitimacy of authority (presence of organizational cues indicating that the HRM function has high status and credibility) and relevance (the HRM function aligns individual employee goals with the organization’s strategic goals). They argued that consistency is captured in this context by information such as the instrumentality of the HRM system (e.g., desired behaviors are consistently rewarded) and the validity of the HRM system (i.e., there is consistency between what the HR system purports to do and what it actually accomplishes). They argue that consensus is indicated by information regarding the level of agreement among principal HRM decision-makers and employees’ fairness perceptions.
While we do not necessarily object to the specific cues Bowen and Ostroff outlined in their effort to articulate what is meant by and contributes to a “strong” HRM system, our reading of Kelley’s covariation theory indicates that it is potentially being misapplied here. First, covariation theory is about determining the locus of causality for an effect. In this context, they argue that the locus is the entity (HRM system), but what is the effect? From our reading, we presume they are modeling how employees attribute the locus of causality for employee work-related behaviors within the organization, but this question is never explicitly addressed. Stated differently, we believe it is imperative to specify whose behavior and what effect is in view to apply this attribution theory. Similarly, we are not convinced that some of their ways of operationalizing Kelley’s factors are faithful representations of the respective conceptualizations. For example, Bowen and Ostroff never explained their distinctiveness indicators in terms of how one organization’s HRM system compares to other organizations’ HRM systems. Distinctiveness is “the impression … attributed to the thing if it uniquely occurs when the thing is present and does not occur in its absence” (Kelley, 1967, p. 197). In short, while we can accept that their model points to information that social perceivers would attend to in drawing a conclusion regarding HRM system strength, we do not see their conceptual work (or the subsequent empirical work by Sanders and Yang [2016] and Sanders et al. [2008]) as definitively illustrating a contribution grounded in attributions. Attributions are a very specific and narrow type of social perception. It has been noted elsewhere that covariation theory is occasionally invoked incorrectly (Tomlinson, 2018), and we reiterate that concern here.

Theoretical Contributions

On a more positive note, we would like to highlight what we saw as a very noteworthy theoretical contribution by Vlachos et al. (2017). Their multilevel model of how CSR affects employees investigated the effect of managers’ attributions for CSR on employee attributions. We regard this as a very significant theoretical contribution. Prior to this study, extant research had not explored how the attributions of other observers create social information that is used by focal observers evaluating actors. Due to causal ambiguity inherent in CSR motives, managers should be deemed an informative source when employees arrive at their attributional conclusions, and this effect should be more pronounced for managers with longer tenure (because they have more experience with the organization that informs their own attributions). Moreover, employee attributions were hypothesized to predict employee advocacy on behalf of the organization (another significant theoretical contribution, speaking to the extent to which employees would engage in important boundary-spanning behavior, as opposed to the normal outcome variables of satisfaction, commitment, etc.).
Empirical and Methodological Considerations

Chow and Feltz (2008) raised an important methodological issue when it comes to generating aggregate measures of attribution dimensions in light of their low consensus estimates for these variables. In their study, team attribution dimensions were measured with the Revised Causal Dimension Scale (McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992), a commonly used scale. The respondent is asked to provide an attribution for the outcome under study and then respond to subsequent semantic differential items indicating the extent to which this attributed cause is internal, controllable, and stable. (A similar approach is used in the Causal Dimension Scale for Teams, validated using interactive sports teams, such as soccer.) The practical challenge here is that many outcomes have multiple causes, and researchers typically do not analyze the ascribed causes directly to ensure respondents are listing the same cause before providing ratings on attribution dimensions. Even on the same team, where the outcome is the same, team members may reach different attributions for the cause of that outcome, and as a result, they have different attributions in mind when responding to measures of the attribution dimensions. This measurement approach poses a challenge insofar as it is “unable to accurately detect whether team attributions represent an emergent group perception or merely an individual’s perception about the team” (p. 1187). As it has been cogently noted elsewhere, once we move beyond the individual level with a given construct, we must demonstrate a requisite degree of consensus, or shared perception of the construct, at that level (Fulmer, 2018).

In other words, assessing aggregation statistics on causal attribution dimensions alone might not go far enough to establish shared perceptions on attributed causes. Even if we just consider the locus of causality, Hewstone (1989) points out that “the categories of internal and external causality are very broad, containing a heterogeneous collection of attributions” (p. 31). Measurement strategies like the Revised Causal Dimension Scale are designed to avoid the “fundamental attribution research error” (Russell, McAuley, & Tarico, 1987); researchers assume that certain causal ascriptions will be universally classified into certain causal attribution dimensions even though the individuals they study sometimes reach different conclusions (e.g., certain forms of ability might be interpreted as unstable instead of stable, etc.). Therefore, the Revised Causal Dimension Scale and similar measures allow researchers to “fast-forward” to the causal dimension profile to see how respondents interpret ascribed causes, regardless of what those causes are. But in a social context where we are interested in examining how attributions emerge at higher levels, it becomes more imperative for researchers to gain assurance that the ascribed cause itself, as well as the dimensional profile, is shared among perceivers at a given level. Certain content analytical tools can be used to assess shared perceptions of ascribed causes among members of a social unit (Hewstone, 1989).
Finally, we note that several researchers included in our review created context-specific attribution measures (e.g., Vlachos et al., 2017) and were not as interested in causal dimensions per se. Researchers that are interested in aggregating attribution dimensions should take great care to ensure the validity of their methods and measures. Perhaps offering and subsequently evaluating an open-text response on the perceived cause of the outcome of interest would allow for subsequent content analysis and tests of inter-rater agreement. Another suggestion would be to specifically prime the participants to the cause of interest in the study to ensure that the responses to the causal dimensions are made regarding the same cause. However, the identification of the mechanisms leading to these variations in the perceptions of the cause of the outcome may itself be a worthy direction for future research.

Conclusion

While individuals engage in psychological activities that lead to judgments (like attributions) and states (like trust), these processes are better understood as social psychological. Stated differently, individuals interacting with others do not arrive at their judgments or states in a vacuum. Shared social contexts influence these judgments and states in important ways, and given the increasing reliance on various forms of interdependence in society (teamwork, cross-cultural interaction), we believe cross- and multilevel research can shed new insight on these important phenomena. We offer this review of how attribution theories – outside of the trust literature – have recently expanded their focus to include multilevel research, and we hope this work inspires other researchers exploring the nexus between attributions and trust.

References


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