The implementation of attribution theory in leadership: a systematical literature review

A implementação da teoria da atribuição na liderança: uma revisão sistemática da literatura

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ABSTRACT
This study provides a survey of the literature on the application of attribution theory in leadership and organizational behavior. The study's goal is to investigate how attribution theory might be used to improve corporate leadership practices in Indonesia, specifically in avoiding harmful attributional biases. This study reviews 22 articles published from 2013 to 2023 related to the topic of applying attribution theory in leadership. The results of the review show that leaders' communication style influences the leadership attributions that emerge in virtual teams. In addition, leadership support for work-life balance can reduce employees' counterproductive behaviors by mitigating work-family conflict. Additionally, big data-driven marketing attributions can enhance customer value attribution accuracy. Furthermore, leaders' commitment to public ideals has a favorable relationship with charismatic leadership attributions and, as a result, lower turnover rates. The research results highlight how attributions significantly influence employees' reactions to policies, leaders' styles, and organizational outcomes. Identifying key drivers
of employees' attribution tendencies can empower leaders to cultivate more positive leadership results.

**Keywords:** attribution theory, leadership, organizational behavior, counterproductive behaviors.

**RESUMO**
Este estudo apresenta uma pesquisa da literatura sobre a aplicação da teoria da atribuição na liderança e no comportamento organizacional. O objetivo do estudo é investigar como a teoria da atribuição pode ser usada para melhorar as práticas de liderança corporativa na Indonésia, especificamente para evitar vieses de atribuição prejudiciais. Este estudo analisa 22 artigos publicados de 2013 a 2023 relacionados ao tópico da aplicação da teoria da atribuição na liderança. Os resultados da revisão mostram que o estilo de comunicação dos líderes influencia as atribuições de liderança que surgem em equipes virtuais. Além disso, o apoio da liderança ao equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional pode reduzir os comportamentos contraprodutivos dos funcionários a atenuar o conflito entre trabalho e família. Além disso, as atribuições de marketing orientadas por big data podem aumentar a precisão da atribuição de valor ao cliente. Além disso, o compromisso dos líderes com ideais públicos tem uma relação favorável com atribuições de liderança carismática e, como resultado, taxas de rotatividade mais baixas. Os resultados da pesquisa destacam como as atribuições influenciam significativamente as reações dos funcionários às políticas, os estilos dos líderes e os resultados organizacionais. A identificação dos principais fatores das tendências de atribuição dos funcionários pode capacitar os líderes a cultivar resultados de liderança mais positivos.

**Palavras-chave:** teoria da atribuição, liderança, comportamento organizacional, comportamentos contraproducentes.

**1 INTRODUCTION**

The global business world is faced with a rapid and disruptive digital change. Digital technology has become more widely used in practically every sector of business and the economy as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Farahdiba et al., 2020, Nasution et al., 2020, Warae et al., 2021). At the same time, advances in artificial intelligence, automation, and Web technologies are also fundamentally changing the business order. In this era of massive digital transformation, organizational leadership is a major challenge. It requires visionary leaders who are able to adapt to new technologies, put innovation and creativity as organizational culture, and massively renew business strategies and operations. Unfortunately, many studies show that many organizations are still not ready for this change. In Indonesia, in recent years, organizational leadership has gained popularity. Many organizations and companies are striving to develop effective and ethical leaders to improve competitiveness (Handoko et al., 2022). However, there are still many challenges faced in the practice of leadership in Indonesia.
A recent survey shows that as many as 89% of Indonesian employees are dissatisfied with the leadership in their workplace (Dale Carnegie, 2021). The most common include poor communication, lack of trust and integrity, and inability to solve problems properly. This results in low employee productivity and commitment. One of the root causes of this problem is believed to be related to attributional bias and leadership errors in making judgments about employee performance and behavior (Siagian, 2020). For example, it tends to blame failures on individual character without considering situational factors. This triggers excessive punishment and decreased motivation.

There has been growing interest in applying attribution theory to understand leadership behavior in organizations (Hewstone & Ganis, 2022). Martinko et al. (2007) argue that "attributions made by leaders about followers and attributions made by followers about leaders have profound implications for leadership processes and outcomes (p. 147). For example, if a leader ascribes a subordinate's poor performance to an internal disposition such as laziness, he or she may punish immediately instead of trying to understand the cause of the performance problem. Conversely, if followers ascribe the leader's poor decisions to external factors beyond his control, they may be less satisfied with his leadership.

Organizational leadership has long been recognized as a key factor influencing organizational effectiveness and success (Yukl, 2013). The practice of inspiring and motivating subordinates to accomplish group objectives is known as leadership. The literature has identified a number of different leadership styles, including transactional leadership which focuses on exchanging rewards with followers, and transformational leadership which seeks to inspire followers with a shared vision and mission (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Several previous studies have explored the role of attributions in leadership. For example, Dasborough & Ashkanasy (2002) showed that leaders who make internal attributions (holding subordinates responsible for their negative emotions) tend to show more punitive responses than leaders who make external attributions. Martinko & Gardner (1987) also found that the attributional style of managers who tend to punish subordinates is associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

However, more research is needed to understand how attribution theory is actually applied in organizational leadership practices. This study aims to explore more deeply how attribution theory can be applied to improve organizational leadership practices in Indonesia, especially in avoiding harmful attributional biases. It is hoped that the results
of the study can contribute to Indonesian organizational behavior research and assist organizations/companies in training their leaders.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Fritz Heider proposed the notion of attribution for the first time in 1958. According to (Heider, 1958), attribution theory is a theory that explains the reasons of one's own and other people's conduct, determining whether the behavior is impacted by internal or external variables. According to attribution theory, individuals attempt to understand why others act in certain ways; in other words, conduct is caused by attribution. As per the attribution theory, an individual's risk behavior can be influenced directly or indirectly by environmental factors and personal characteristics (Hewett et al., 2018). The former pertains to multiple contingent outcomes that have a probability distribution that is uncertain or risky, while the latter can be classified into two categories: cognitive attribution and affective attribution. The processing of mental information motivated by assessments of oneself, others, and the environment is what makes up cognition, which is often proposed to influence individual hazardous behavior and acknowledged as one of the most important components in comprehending risky decisions (Bazerman and Moore 2008). On the other hand, affective conduct, which has been found to be a crucial factor in determining an individual's risk behavior, describes the conscious and unconscious processing of emotions and feelings (Zajonc, 1980). In particular, dangerous decision-making is influenced by personal cognitive sources of risk attitudes, or positive and negative emotions, and risk behavior is influenced by environmental (contextual) elements via the cognitive and affective states of the individual. (H€onl, Meissner, and Wulf 2017).

2.2 LEADERSHIP

The actions of a person in charge of overseeing a group's operations are referred to as leadership. (Fiedler, 1981) has an analogous definition: The pursuit of directing and coordinating group activities is commonly understood as leadership conduct. Developing a working rapport, complimenting and berating other members, and demonstrating concern for different points of view and the well-being of the group are some examples of these actions. The process of influencing others or providing an example for followers in an effort to accomplish group objectives is known as leadership (Junita et al., 2018).
Robbins and Judge (2015) define leadership as the capacity to persuade a group of people to pursue objectives. Effective leadership entails using persuasion without resorting to violence. A leader needs to be able to inspire others.

According to Kouzes and Posner (2017), to be a good leader, a person must have five characteristics, namely: 1) Showing the way (model the way), 2) Inspire a shared vision, 3) Challenge the process (challenge the process), 4) Enable others to act, and 5) Encourage the heart.

Three main components make up leadership: vision, values, and influence. To motivate their followers to accomplish shared objectives, leaders need to possess a certain set of qualities, aptitudes, and competencies (Martoyo, 2007).

2.3 ATTRIBUTION THEORY IN LEADERSHIP

Heider (1958) presented the idea of attribution, elucidating that attributions are the means by which individuals ascertain cause and effect in order to resolve issues and improve their interactions with their environment. An attribution is, in essence, a basic label for an outcome, whether it be favorable or unfavorable. It differs from an attribute, which is a personal trait or quality, in that it refers to the process of assigning certain traits to someone. This hypothesis was further developed by Jones and Harris (1967) to explain the basic attribution mistake, which is the propensity for people to attribute circumstances and surroundings to occurrences rather than the individuals themselves. For instance, rather than being blamed for the difficult economic times, a colleague's inability to meet sales goals may be attributed to dispositional attributions or internal attributes like personality or intellect. However, if you try to meet goals and fall short of them, you'll be more inclined to attribute the failure on outside forces like scarce resources or time. This exhibits a self-serving bias, which is the propensity to place the responsibility for one's accomplishments and hold oneself accountable for setbacks. (Hughes et al. 2015). This theory is very relevant applied in leadership. A leader needs to understand the behavior of his team members based on internal and external attributions (Hughes et al., 2009). For example, team members who are often late because of their procrastination nature (internal attribution) or because they are stuck in traffic (external attribution). Understanding this attribution will affect how leaders motivate their teams.

The application of attribution theory to leaders is also necessary to evaluate the success and failure of achieving organizational goals (Eberly et al, 2013). Leaders need to analyze whether failures are caused by internal organizational factors (e.g. system
errors) or external factors (e.g. economic conditions). This is important so that leaders can determine the right corrective steps.

The concepts of "self-awareness" and "accurate self-assessment" are defined by Bar-On et al. (2007) and are associated with team performance. High self-aware leaders learn from their mistakes with grace and are open to receiving input from their followers (Goleman 1995). In short, attribution theory provides leaders with a deep understanding of the causes of subordinate behavior and critical organizational success factors. Leaders who understand the principle of attribution will be able to motivate, evaluate, and improve organizational performance more effectively.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the results of a research review on the discussion of Implementation Attribution Theory in Leadership from 2013 to 2023. The Papers were collected before pandemic, on pandemic, and after pandemic Covid 19.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rennie et al.</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Communication style drives emergent leadership attribution in virtual teams</td>
<td>These results imply that virtual environments inside current social networks foster adaptable group structures that rely more on task performance and communication style than delegated leadership.</td>
<td>Frontiers in Psychology</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Jin et al.</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Family Supportive Leadership and Counterproductive Work Behavior  The Roles of Work-Family Conflict, Moral Disengagement and Personal Life Attribution</td>
<td>The study's findings indicate that family-friendly leadership can lessen workers' perceptions of work-family conflict, which in turn lowers moral disengagement and CWB.</td>
<td>Frontiers in Psychology</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Buhalis and Volchek</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Bridging marketing theory and big data analytics The taxonomy of marketing attribution</td>
<td>The results enable reflection on how well modern attribution algorithms capture the details of the four-customer journey, which fills a theoretical need in the existing framework for improving value attribution accuracy.</td>
<td>International Journal of Information Management</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Tavares et al.</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Commitment to Public Values, Charismatic Leadership Attributions, and Employee Turnover in Street-Level Bureaucracies</td>
<td>The findings show that in more demanding and stressful work circumstances, there is a positive correlation between perceived charismatic leadership and leader commitment to PV and decreased staff turnover.</td>
<td>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Hesmert et al.</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>The a priori of public leadership Social attributions to public and private leaders in different performance contexts</td>
<td>The findings indicate that sector cues have an impact on these attributions, which then have an impact on behavioral intentions—but only when combined with performance data.</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Seele and Eberl</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Newcomers reactions to unfulfilled leadership expectations: An attribution theory approach</td>
<td>European Management Journal</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Kroner</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Offence associated proactive, reactive, and acquisitive attributions that inform theory, assessment, and intervention</td>
<td>Journal of Crime and Justice</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Liu et al.</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Effects of economic compensation on public acceptance of waste-to-energy incineration projects an attribution theory perspective</td>
<td>Journal of Environmental Planning and Management</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Zhao et al.</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>The Employee Attributions of Corporate Hypocrisy in Corporate Social Responsibility An Explore Research Based on Grounded Theory</td>
<td>SAGE Open</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Ginder et al.</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Effects of Internal-External Congruence-Based CSR Positioning An Attribution Theory Approach</td>
<td>Journal of Business Ethics</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Middleton</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>All aboard Scottish and Welsh multi-level voting; competence.</td>
<td>Regional &amp; Federal Studies</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Coetzee and Henning</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>A tale of two ships: Follower attributions of leadership with reference to team morale in an air traffic control centre</td>
<td>South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Baeckström et al.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Millionaire investors financial advisors, attribution theory and gender differences</td>
<td>The European Journal of Finance</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>van et al.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Attributions of leaders' charisma increase after their death: The mediating role of identity leadership and identity fusion</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Mahboobi et al.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Coalition Game Theory In Attribution Modeling</td>
<td>Journal of Advertising Research</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Pardo and Alfonso</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Applying attribution theory to determine the factors that lead to the failure of entrepreneurial ventures in Colombia</td>
<td>Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development</td>
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issues were insufficient revenue to sustain the firm, inadequate funding, control concerns, and unstable legal and financial environments.

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<th>Authors</th>
<th>Journal</th>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Feeling Good by Doing Good Employee CSR-Induced Attributions, Job Satisfaction, and the Role of Charismatic Leadership</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Vlachos et al.</td>
<td>Journal of Business Ethics</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Attributions and requirements of Islamic leadership</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Sari</td>
<td>Management Research Review</td>
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**CONCLUSIONS**

The research papers provide several noteworthy findings regarding the role of attributions in leadership and organizational behavior. Firstly, Rennie et al. (2023) found that leaders' communication style impacts the leadership attributions that emerge in virtual teams. Secondly, Jin et al. (2022) revealed that leadership support for work-life balance reduces employees' counterproductive behaviors by mitigating work-family conflict. Thirdly, Buhalis & Volchek (2021) showed that big data-driven marketing attributions can enhance customer value attribution accuracy. Additionally, Tavares et al. (2021) demonstrated that leaders' commitment to public values relates positively to charismatic leadership attributions and subsequently lower turnover rates. Moreover, Hesmert et al. (2021) found that social attributions of public versus private sector leaders...
differ based on performance cues. Finally, Seele & Eberl (2020) evidenced that unfulfilled leadership expectations lead to varying attribution levels and behavioral impacts for newcomers. In summary, the research underscores how attributions significantly influence employees' reactions to policies, leaders' styles and organizational outcomes. Identifying key drivers of employees' attribution tendencies can empower leaders to cultivate more positive leadership results. In conclusion, attributions play an important role in understanding employees' behavior and responses towards organizational policies and leadership styles. Identifying key factors influencing employees' various attribution types can help leaders improve positive leadership outcomes.

In conclusion, attributions play an important role in understanding employees’ behavior and responses towards organizational policies and leadership styles. Identifying key factors influencing employees' various attribution types can help leaders improve positive leadership outcomes.
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