BEYOND INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL: A DYADIC THEORY OF RELATIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

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Attribution theory argues that people assess the locus of causality of achievement-relevant events as either internal or external. Given the frequency of interpersonal interactions in organizations, we posit that a third category—relational attributions—may be used. Drawing on relational perspectives, we lay the conceptual foundation and develop a dyadic theory of relational attributions, proposing their antecedents and linking them to relationship-focused behaviors, which influence the quality of interpersonal links within organizations.

According to attribution theory, people have an innate tendency to make sense of their surroundings by acting as naive psychologists (Heider, 1958). When confronted with certain events, people seek to determine their causes. For example, in the organizational context one might ask, "Why did I get passed over for promotion?" or "Why did my boss criticize me for my work on this project?" (e.g., Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006). Through the use of attributions, people attempt to (re)establish control over their lives and improve their ability to predict future events (Kelley, 1971; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Attribution theory suggests that in answering "why" questions, people primarily distinguish between internal (self) and external (outside of self) explanations, thereby determining the locus of causality for an event (Allport, 1979/1954; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). Whether the cause of an event is seen as internal or external systematically influences people's subsequent behaviors, motivations, cognitions, and affect (Weiner, 1985). For instance, an employee who is wondering why he did not get assigned the lead position on a new project might attribute it to his lack of skills (internal attribution) or his supervisor's lack of material support (external attribution). The employee may be more likely to participate in skills training if he makes an internal attribution for a failure to be promoted, or, alternatively, he might decide to quit or ask for a job transfer if he makes an external attribution (Martinko et al., 2006).

Identifying the locus of causality has been at the core of attribution theory since its inception and has generated an extensive research stream in the field of organizational behavior (see Martinko, 1995, 2004, and Martinko et al., 2006, for comprehensive reviews). But the question emerges of whether the "internal" and "external" categories capture the entire conceptual space of this phenomenon. In recent years the field of organizational behavior has greatly benefited from a consideration of levels of analysis (e.g., dyads, teams, business units; House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2009). In modeling the complexities involved in bridging levels of analysis, interesting and compelling theoretical insights may be gained (e.g., Contractor, Wasserman, & Faust, 2006; Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom, & Harman, 2009). Attribution theory has mainly focused on the individual level of analysis and identified the antecedents and consequences of attributions to either the self or someone/something outside the self, neglecting any po-

tential relational aspects of performance. We believe that examining locus of causality attributions at higher levels of analysis has the potential to provide unique insights regarding the consequences of attributions while simultaneously expanding the scope of attribution theory. In this article we demonstrate this potential by examining attributions made to the dyad.

Relationships, teams, and groups are active research domains and central components of organizational life (e.g., Dutton & Ragins, 2006; Ferris et al., 2009; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005). Because being embedded within a social context can make it difficult (if not impossible) to view the causes of many events as solely internal or external, we posit that individuals draw from a third set of locus attributions that we call "relational attributions." Relational attributions are those explanations made by a focal individual that locate the cause of an event within the relationship the individual has with another person. They are not merely combinations of an internal and an external attribution but, rather, are attributions uniquely grounded in the interaction between two partners. In other words, relational attributions are not reducible to the actions of either partner alone. For example, an employee may attribute the failure to meet a project deadline to a lack of clear communication with her supervisor. This employee does not solely blame her own abilities and skills for the missed deadline, nor does she attribute blame solely to her supervisor. Instead, she attributes the failure to the poor interaction she had with her supervisor—a feature of their relationship.

By moving beyond the internal/external distinction, this construct advances attribution theory and provides a more complete picture of the loci of causality, including their antecedents and consequences. The introduction of relational attributions and their integration with new relational perspectives has the potential to broaden our understanding of attribution theory and how it predicts organizational behaviors. Figure 1 contrasts relational with internal and external attributions and provides specific examples of all three types of attributions, with an emphasis on explanations for negative events. Figure 2 depicts the relationships between the three locus of causality categories and their antecedents and outcomes. The dyadic theory of relational attributions—our contribution to attri-
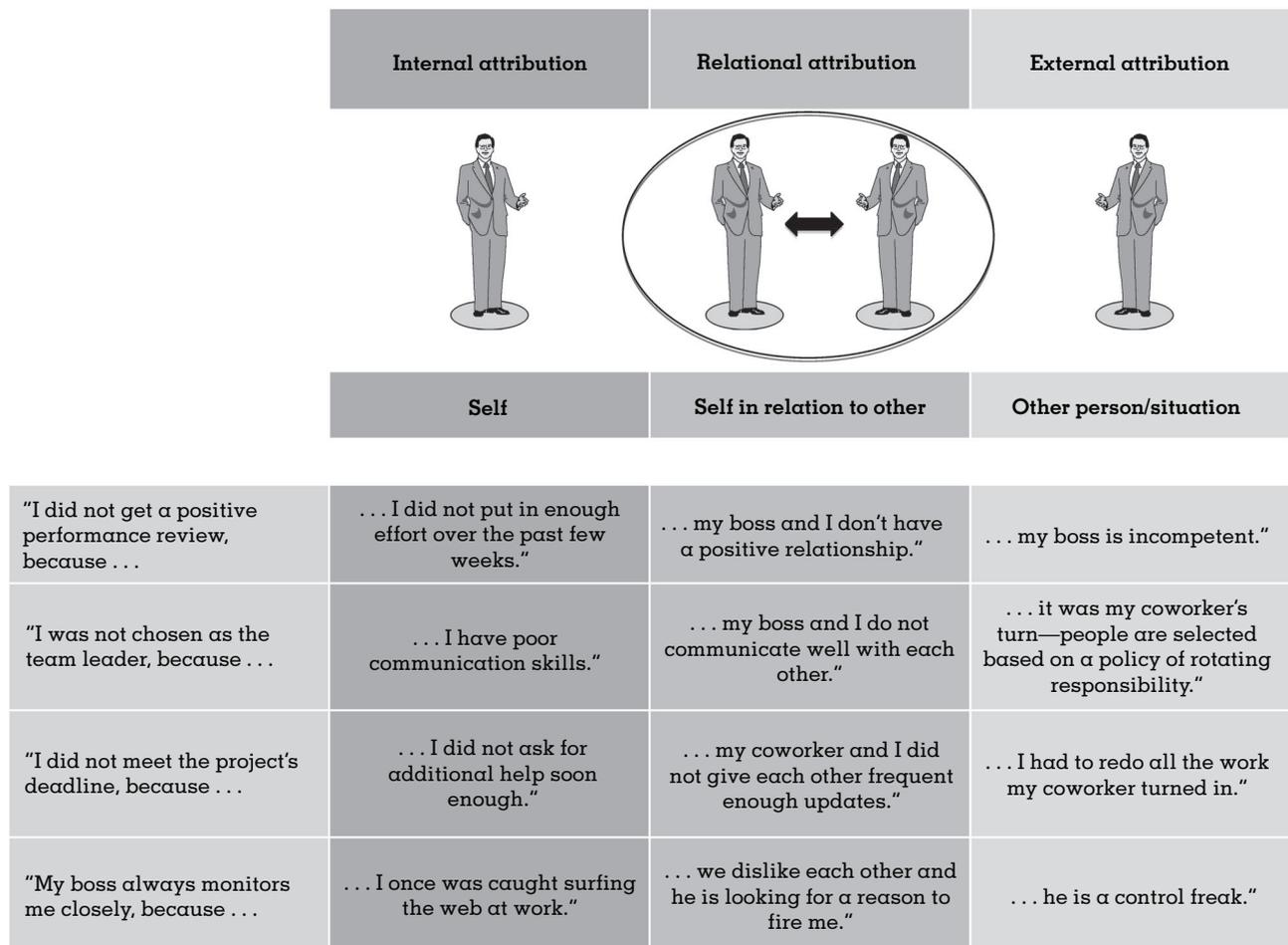
bution theory—is depicted in the gray-shaded area. We refer to these figures throughout the article.

By extending the reach of attribution theory, we also hope to push its boundaries so that it may "emerge as a major theory of motivation" within the field of organization science (Martinko et al., 2006: 129). Recently, Martinko, Harvey, and Dasborough pointed out that attribution processes have generally been "underutilized in the organizational sciences, yet have tremendous potential to explain a wide range of workplace behaviors" (2011: 144). This omission can be partially explained by attribution theory's lack of focus on the relational aspects that are endemic to organizational life. Thus, conceptualizing relational attributions is a significant step toward maximizing attribution theory's potential within the organizational sciences.

Focusing on negative achievement-related events in leader-follower relationships, we propose that relational attributions often trigger relationship-focused behaviors (which we label *relationship work*), an argument not present in the current scope of attribution theory. Specifically, we explain how relational attributions, depending on their specific content, can predict task- or person-focused voice and citizenship behaviors. Hence, relational attributions may be critical in the development of positive social ties within organizations and should inform research in leadership, teams, social networks, and other topics focusing on interpersonal interactions.

The article is structured as follows. First, we establish how relational attributions differ from internal and external attributions, and we provide examples of common relational attributions within organizational settings. Second, we draw on relational self theory to outline the theoretical rationale for distinguishing relational attributions from their internal and external counterparts. Third, following Kelley's covariation model (1967, 1973), we describe how relational attributions are formed and propose personal and situational characteristics as antecedents. Fourth, building on Weiner's (1985) original framework, we develop a theory that identifies the general cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences associated with relational attributions in response to negative events, emphasizing those links not previously

FIGURE 1
Contrasting Internal and External Attributions with Relational Attributions Within a Dyad in Response to Negative Achievement-Related Events

Internal attribution	Relational attribution	External attribution

Self	Self in relation to other	Other person/situation

"I did not get a positive performance review, because . . .	. . . I did not put in enough effort over the past few weeks."	. . . my boss and I don't have a positive relationship."	. . . my boss is incompetent."
"I was not chosen as the team leader, because . . .	. . . I have poor communication skills."	. . . my boss and I do not communicate well with each other."	. . . it was my coworker's turn—people are selected based on a policy of rotating responsibility."
"I did not meet the project's deadline, because . . .	. . . I did not ask for additional help soon enough."	. . . my coworker and I did not give each other frequent enough updates."	. . . I had to redo all the work my coworker turned in."
"My boss always monitors me closely, because . . .	. . . I once was caught surfing the web at work."	. . . we dislike each other and he is looking for a reason to fire me."	. . . he is a control freak."

captured by attribution theory. Fifth, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our conceptualization, including ways in which relational attributions may advance other relationship-oriented theories in organizational behavior at the dyadic as well as higher levels of analysis. Finally, we close with a discussion of the limitations of our analysis and propose future research that might address these issues.
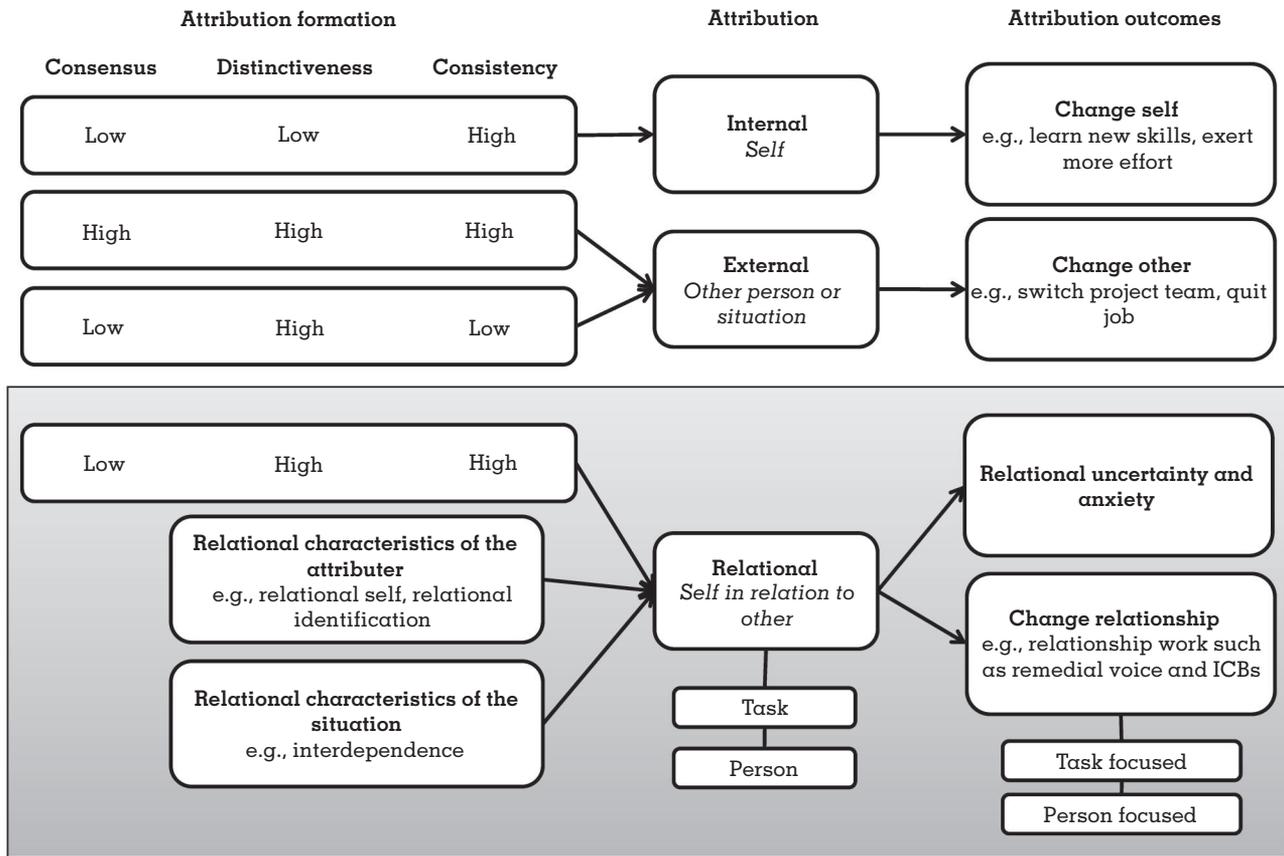
BACKGROUND AND DEFINITION

Attribution Theory

Attributions are the causal explanations that individuals use to interpret the world around them and adapt to their environment, especially when reacting to events viewed as important,

novel, unexpected, and negative (Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007; Weiner, 1990). Following Heider's (1958) initial work, the most influential lines of attribution research originated from Kelley and Weiner. Kelley (1967, 1973) focused on how individuals determine the cause of a behavior or event by considering information regarding the consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness of the behavior or event. Kelley's model explores the dimensions people use to locate the causality of a behavior or event, which can involve oneself or others. For example, if a student receives a failing grade on an exam (or observes that a fellow student received a failing grade), she may ask, "Did everyone fail?" (consensus—how shared the behavior/event is), "How did I/they perform on previous exams?" (consisten-

FIGURE 2
A Dyadic Theory of Relational Attributions in Achievement-Related Situations

Attribution formation			Attribution	Attribution outcomes
Consensus	**Distinctiveness**	**Consistency**		
Low	Low	High	**Internal** *Self*	**Change self** e.g., learn new skills, exert more effort
High	High	High	**External** *Other person or situation*	**Change other** e.g., switch project team, quit job
Low	High	Low		

Low	High	High		**Relational uncertainty and anxiety**
Relational characteristics of the attributer e.g., relational self, relational identification			**Relational** *Self in relation to other*	**Change relationship** e.g., relationship work such as remedial voice and ICBs
Relational characteristics of the situation e.g., interdependence			Task	Task focused
			Person	Person focused

cy—how consistent a behavior/event is across similar contexts and times), and "How did I/they perform on other assignments such as written papers?" (distinctiveness—how unique the behavior/event is to the particular situation). The pattern of information gleaned could be used to infer an internal attribution (e.g., ability) and/or external attribution (e.g., it was a very tough test) for failing the exam.

In contrast, Weiner and colleagues focused on the *consequences* of four different types of causal judgments that people make for events regarding their performance (Weiner et al., 1971; see also Martinko, Moss, Douglas, & Borkowski, 2007). Specifically, they argued that an individual's expectations, emotions, and behaviors could be predicted by understanding whether the event's cause was believed to be (1) internal or external, (2) stable or unstable, (3) controllable or uncontrollable, and (4) global or specific. Our article expands Weiner's first dimension by adding a relational locus of causality and iden-

tifies how it can be predicted using Kelley's model.

Together, Kelley's (1967, 1973) and Weiner's (Weiner et al., 1971) models reveal that the attributional process is fairly complex and can be cognitively taxing. Within a dyad, our focal level of analysis, the historical interactions between the two partners all serve as potential cues in the attributional process and require the recollection of and reflection about the dynamic processes inherent in any relationship. Because of the ambiguity and complexity involved in the attributional process, individuals may make multiple attributions at once and generate implicit confidence levels for each attribution. For example, a salesperson may believe that he did not close a deal because he was not aggressive enough (internal attribution) *and* because his company did not allow him to offer additional discounts (external attribution). This salesperson may feel very confident that the price made a significant difference to the cus-

tomer but may also be moderately confident that his own sales strategy contributed to the failure. In addition, he may also believe that he and the customer had a weak relationship bond due to infrequent communication (relational attribution). The salesperson's subsequent attitudes, motivations, and behaviors may be a function of the attribution he feels most confident about, and we believe this last type of explanation (a weak relationship bond) has been absent from the literature.

Scope of the Article

Before examining relational attributions in more detail, we specify some key boundary conditions. Obviously, many events that provide people performance feedback do not involve relationships (e.g., scores on a standardized test, a monthly report on the number of widgets produced). These lie outside the boundaries of our analysis and are likely covered by the internal/external distinction. Relational attributions primarily apply to events that involve two people, and we focus on the dyadic level to improve the predictability and precision of our arguments. This boundary condition follows Ferris and colleagues (2009: 1380), who acknowledged the need for focusing on "dyadic entities" by developing a multidimensional conceptualization of work relationships between two actors. Typical daily dyadic interactions for employees involve peers, subordinates, customers, and suppliers. One of the most salient involves the relationship with one's supervisor (Ferris et al., 2009; Graen, 1976), and we use it as the primary example throughout our discussion.

We also focus on achievement situations that reflect negatively on performance. Many employees consider performance-related events vital to their future standing within an organization, and these events can consist of unexpected and negative episodes. In line with the general notion that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), negative events trigger more extensive attributional processes because they threaten goal accomplishment and motivate people to find underlying causes so they can avoid similar events in the future (Weiner, 1990), whereas positive feedback does not generally motivate such changes in behavior. In addition, negative relationships may have a greater impact on crit-

ical organizational outcomes than positive relationships (Labianca & Brass, 2006). Thus, negative relational achievement situations provide the most likely ground for relational attributions to occur. Finally, we focus our attention solely on the locus of causality dimension of the attribution process. For our purposes, it was important to limit ourselves to describing the construct of relational attributions and identifying its nomological network without considering the effects of interactions with other attribution dimensions. We will return to these definitional constraints in the discussion section.

Relational Perspectives in Attribution Research

Some previous attribution research has been conducted in explicitly relational contexts and is therefore important for our analysis. Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, and Elliot (1998) found that the self-serving bias (internal attributions for success, external ones for failure; Zuckerman, 1979) was less pronounced in a relational context. By including the self as part of a relationship, completely externalizing negative feedback becomes less likely. Another stream of research has shown that individuals are more likely to help another person in distress if they attribute that distress to external causes (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004; Weiner, 1995). Also, in applying attribution theory to the leadership context, Green and Mitchell's (1979) theory emphasizes how leader attributions about a subordinate's performance influence leader-member relations. Martinko and Gardner (1987) added subordinate attributions and behaviors to Green and Mitchell's model, acknowledging that both partners in the leader-member relationship and their interactions matter to the attribution process. Martinko, Moss, Douglas, and Borkowski (2007) expanded this research to demonstrate how leaders' and members' attributional styles interactively predict their relationship quality. Finally, Anderson (1991) coded participants' attributions following failure and success along thirteen dimensions. Interestingly, interpersonalness, defined as the extent to which the cause of the event reflected on the attributer's relationships with other people, emerged as the strongest dimension. While we view the relationship as a third locus of causality as opposed to a separate dimension, as did Anderson (1991), his research demon-

strates that individuals do use relationships to interpret and make sense of performance-related events.

While all of these perspectives examined attributions within relational contexts, they did not consider that the attribution *itself* may be relational and therefore lead to consequences not currently predicted by internal and external attributions. For example, Martinko, Moss, Douglas, and Borkowski (2007) described how clashing attributions by subordinates and leaders over the same event may lead to a deterioration of the relationship. Their model, however, does not discuss the possibility that the leader-member relationship might prime a relational mindset that could override common attributional biases (such as the self-serving bias) and direct the leader and/or the subordinate to ascribe attributions to the relationship itself. Martinko et al. (2006), however, argued that emerging work on leader-member relationships is trending toward a more dynamic understanding of the leader-member interaction process. This reciprocal interaction between individuals and their relationship partners is what we are attempting to capture with the relational attribution concept.

Defining Relational Attributions

The classic distinction between internal and external attributions assumes that individuals can clearly distinguish between these two categories. Classic attribution research would argue that locating the cause of an event in one's abilities ("I was not promoted to a management position because I am not good at strategic thinking") is an internal attribution. Alternately, if the cause of an event is ascribed to economic trends ("I was fired because my position was outsourced"), it would be classified as an external attribution.

The distinction between internal and external, however, is not always so obvious. Research has established that individuals are often closely linked to a variety of constituents (peers, customers, supervisors, etc.) and these ties have unique consequences. For example, employees with many interpersonal links through their jobs are less likely to voluntarily quit (Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004). Individuals who are embedded in relationships may gain increased access to career and promotion opportunities (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Employees who fit well with the organization and their coworkers (i.e., in terms of personality and values) are more likely to stay, perform better, and develop more favorable attitudes toward the organization and their job (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). These studies, among others, illustrate that employees often have close relationships at work that they may not be clearly separated from and that elicit unique motivations. Extending this thinking to attribution theory, we posit that people often make relational attributions, which we define as *those explanations made by a focal individual that locate the cause of an event within the relationship that the individual has with another person.* Relational attributions reflect an explanation by one individual (e.g., the subordinate) within the relationship and may or may not differ from the relationship partner's (e.g., the supervisor) explanation. Figure 1 provides a sample list of possible internal, external, and relational attributions in response to negative feedback situations commonly found in the workplace.

Relational attributions capture features of relationships that can be either task focused or person focused. Organizational science has a tradition of distinguishing between task and person orientations (e.g., initiating structure versus consideration [Stogdill & Coons, 1957], task versus relationship conflict [De Dreu & Weingart, 2003]). Individuals who make relational *task* attributions identify the cause of the event within those relational performance elements resulting in successful task completion, such as coordination, exchange of information in a timely manner, and provision of constructive feedback. Individuals who make relational *person* attributions identify the cause of the event within personal issues that are not directly related to job performance, such as differing values, interpersonal styles, or preferences.

Relational attributions differ from internal and external attributions in that they have two potential agents of change. In the case of internal attributions, attributers have some control over ensuring that an event happens differently in the future by changing the self (e.g., exerting more effort or learning new skills). For external attributions, attributers may have little or no control over the other person or the situation. With relational attributions, the partners share

responsibility for the event and therefore may be motivated to take steps to fix or improve the relationship. However, compared with internal attributions, one's efforts must be recognized and reciprocated by one's partner in order to be successful. A similar idea (one that is part of leader-member exchange [LMX] theory) argues that either partner in the leader-member relationship may initiate the relationship development process but that the process may not advance without reciprocation (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). In addition, the relationship conflict literature argues that "to be successful, the repair process demands the efforts of both the offending and offended parties, since both play a critical role in maintaining the expressive order" (Ren & Gray, 2009: 107). While relationship conflict does not necessarily lead to relational attributions, this perspective suggests that positive developments can occur only when both partners and their interactions are considered (Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR RELATIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

To provide a theoretical rationale for relational attributions, we focus on the theory of the *relational self* (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), because it is broad in scope and explains the underlying psychological mechanisms that guide the interdependencies between individuals in dyadic relationships. The theory of the relational self suggests that people are attuned to the relational aspects of their environments and develop unique motivations based on seeing themselves in relation to and interdependent with others.

Early social psychological theories emphasized an individual's sense of self as being unique and differentiated from others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In contrast, cross-cultural research on the self and research on individuals' social identities have revealed that the construction of the self depends not only on one's unique attributes but also on the relationships and groups in which one takes part (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tajfel, 1982). Based on this line of research, the self literature and the identity literature have come to recognize multiple levels of self-definition. Specifically, Brewer and Gardner (1996) have differentiated between personal, relational, and collective representations of the self.

The relational self is derived from an individual's connections and role relationships with significant others. It reflects the ways in which one thinks about oneself within a particular relationship (Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006), and it has implications for self-definition, self-evaluation, self-regulation, and behaviors expressed in relation to significant others (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Baldwin, 1992) and, hence, for the attributional process. Because the relational self is composed of ties with significant others, the interactions and events that involve it can activate one's relational self (Chen et al., 2006). When activated, the relational self prompts people to focus on themselves in relation to their interpersonal context, and it influences the information that people attend to during interactions. In their search for causal understanding, individuals are directed by their relational self to explore the relational components of their interactions and focus their attention on how they relate to (or fit with) their partners. Accordingly, relational self theory suggests that individuals find not only internal and external explanations but also relational explanations for achievement-oriented interpersonal events. Based on the above discussion, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 1: Relational attributions represent a third category of the locus of causality dimension of attributions and are conceptually different from internal and external attributions.*

Formation of Relational Attributions

Kelley's covariation principle (1967, 1973) explains how people process information from multiple observations in order to make causal attributions: "An effect is attributed to the one of its possible causes with which, over time, it covaries" (1973: 108). The principle suggests that individuals determine the cause of events by considering information related to the consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness of the events. *Consensus* information indicates to what extent the behavior or event is widely shared: if the majority of people experience an event or behavior, then consensus is high. *Consistency* information refers to the extent to which an event or action is consistent across a similar context or time: if someone behaves similarly

during comparable events, then consistency is high. Finally, *distinctiveness* information suggests to what extent a given response is unique to a particular event or person: if an event or behavior transcends different situations, then distinctiveness is low. In combination, consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information provide the basis on which individuals make an internal or external attribution. For example, an employee who is told by his boss that he did not receive a pay raise based on merit may ascertain (1) that the supervisor has given merit increases to other employees (low consensus), (2) that he has never received a merit increase from this supervisor (high consistency), and (3) that he has never received a merit increase from other supervisors in the past (low distinctiveness) and is therefore likely to conclude that he probably does not deserve a merit increase (internal attribution).

A key question, then, is under which circumstances do individuals make relational attributions? We suggest that relational attributions are most likely when consensus is low and both distinctiveness and consistency are high. For example, another employee observes that (1) others have received merit increases (low consensus), (2) she has never received one from her boss (high consistency), but (c) she has frequently received merit raises for her work from other supervisors (high distinctiveness). Because other supervisors have provided merit raises to her, this employee would not make a solely internal attribution ("I'm not a meritorious person") so easily, and because her current supervisor provided merit increases to her colleagues, neither would she make a solely external attribution ("My supervisor is a jerk and never gives anyone a merit raise"). The combination of low consensus with high distinctiveness and consistency suggests that the event rests on the interaction between the partners ("My supervisor and I do not have a positive relationship"). We therefore propose the following.

> *Proposition 2: Within a given relationship, when individuals perceive a relationship event as being low in consensus but high in distinctiveness and consistency, they are more likely to make a relational attribution than an internal or external attribution.*

Of course, attributers' perceptions of the consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency of events are subject to interpretation and, thus, may not mirror objective reality. Kelley states that the attribution process, then, is necessarily "incomplete, subject to bias, ready to proceed on incomplete evidence, and so on" (1973: 109). Moreover, other combinations of the three Kelley dimensions do not map so clearly onto internal, external, or relational attributions. In the example above, what happens when the employee observes that (1) others have received merit increases (low consensus), (2) she has received merit increases before from the current boss (low consistency), and (c) she has received merit increases from past supervisors (low distinctiveness)? Multiple attributions could be made in this instance. Which attribution prevails and is perceived as most probable and therefore likely drives cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions is likely a function of other factors, such as the context or the individual's traits and states. Therefore, we now address some personal and situational characteristics that may influence individuals' interpretative processes in these more ambiguous situations and, thus, may elicit relational attributions.

Personal Antecedents to Relational Attributions

Individuals are often primed to think of themselves as connected with others, which is when the relational self is activated (Baldwin, 1992; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Past interpersonal experiences form cognitive maps that include images of the self and others, as well as scripts based on expected interaction patterns—tools that help us navigate the social world (Baldwin, 1992). The different roles employees hold at work (e.g., role of subordinate) are necessarily relational since their meaning depends on the complementary role (e.g., role of supervisor) within the role relationship, and the resulting relational identity is a function of both individuals' expectations and goals (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). While individuals may have all the tools to think "relationally," the chronic tendency to do so likely varies across people.

For example, people whose personal self is primarily dominant see themselves as differentiated from others and may therefore be more likely to see a clear separation between them-

selves and a relationship partner. For these individuals the distinction of internal versus external attributions will likely explain their attribution processes. In contrast, people whose relational self is most often dominant find their focus shifted away from the individual and toward the relationship (what Markus and Kitayama call "information about the self in relation to another person" [1991: 230]). An employee with a dispositionally active relational self may quickly recognize that his supervisor is treating him differently from his coworkers and, thus, identify low consensus in the supervisor's behavior.

In addition to dispositional differences in the activation of the relational self, the level of *relational identification* individuals experience in their supervisor-subordinate relationship may elicit relational attributions. Sluss and Ashforth define relational identification as "the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of a given role-relationship" (2007: 11). When the relationship with the supervisor has significant meaning, individuals may extend their self-definition to include the role relationship, which makes it more difficult for them to distinguish or differentiate between the self and those aspects of the relationship partner that are pertinent to the role relationship (Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2001), thus making it potentially more difficult to assign causes of events to either the self or the partner. In this situation individuals are more likely to consider the relationship as a whole and evaluate each event from the perspective of what it means for the relationship.

> *Proposition 3: Individuals with highly activated relational selves are more likely to form relational attributions than internal or external attributions.*

> *Proposition 4: Individuals with high levels of relational identification in the subordinate-supervisor role relationship are more likely to form relational attributions than internal or external attributions.*

Situational Antecedents to Relational Attributions

Although some individuals chronically think of themselves as interconnected (e.g., through culture and upbringing), characteristics of the situation can also activate the relational self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). An increased level of interaction and interdependence among employees is an aspect that characterizes today's organizational environment (Ferris et al., 2009). Specific relational cues in the work context include work tasks, performance feedback, coworker interactions, and leadership behaviors (Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006). Obviously, in some work situations interdependence is relatively low and relationships are not focal (e.g., a consultant is hired to provide technical expertise that no one else has). Such settings will not necessarily prime employees' relational self-concepts, and attribution processes more likely will be captured by the internal and external loci of causality.

Oftentimes, however, performance tasks are structured such that employees depend on others for their personal outcomes. Minimally, employees depend on their supervisors for resources like information, financial support, and rewards or assignments. The level and type of interdependence may vary in each relationship, depending on the type of work to be completed (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, 2008). Employees may have to share information or resources in order to complete a task (input interdependence), or they may share performance outcomes with group members or their supervisors (output interdependence). They may need each other (reciprocal interdependence, such as where a supervisor relies on an area specialist's expertise), or one party may be dependent on the other in an unfolding sequence of interactions (serial interdependence). Interdependence is particularly salient within the employee-supervisor relationship and is often emphasized in feedback-related situations like performance evaluations. We propose that employees and supervisors who are highly interdependent are more likely to identify the cause of a negative event as grounded within their relationships.

In support of this idea, Sedikides and colleagues (1998) tested the hypothesis that close relationships place limits on individuals' self-enhancement tendencies, such as the self-serving bias (Zuckerman, 1979). Specifically, they tested the extent to which the self-serving bias exists when two people who are close to each other collaborate on a task. In a set of two experiments, members of either distant or close dyads worked together on an interdependent

outcome task. Following the task, members received false feedback at the dyadic level regarding the performance of both partners. Study participants were then asked to attribute the dyad's performance to either the self or the partner. In dyads where the partners did not know each other, they demonstrated a pattern associated with the self-serving bias, assuming more responsibility for the dyad's success than for its failure. In dyads where the partners were close, however, each attributed failure and success equally to both partners. These results suggest that in situations of interdependence with a pair that is close (such as supervisor and coworkers), employees may be less motivated by self-esteem maintenance and take some responsibility for the outcome, even if it is negative. Thus, relational attributions may occur more often than the basic premise of a self-serving bias might suggest.

> *Proposition 5: Situations high in interdependence are more likely to result in relational attributions than internal and external attributions.*

Consequences of Relational Attributions

Past research has shown that attributions can have predictable and wide-ranging consequences for an attributer's motivation, emotions, and behaviors. Weiner's (1985) attributional theory of motivation and emotion is represented as a temporal sequence in which an event or performance feedback initiates appraisal processes that, in turn, influence attributions. Attributions can impact cognitive and affective reactions, which directly trigger behavioral responses. Thus, we now turn to identifying the unique cognitive and affective reactions that follow relational attributions, and we explain how relational attributions can trigger a set of relationship-oriented behaviors that we label *relationship work*.

General Affective and Cognitive Consequences of Relational Attributions

Relational attributions are complex because both people in the relationship are agentic and can initiate changes in the relationship at any time. Individuals need to simultaneously consider their own actions, their partners' reactions,

and potential behaviors beyond those. Contemplating actions in response to relational attributions may also involve retrospection to evaluate past behavior, recalling not just one's actions but the reactions of the other person and the interactive effects on the relationship, raising such questions as "When I tried to influence my supervisor in the past, how did she react and what did I do that seemed to work/not work?"

This complexity often translates into uncertainty regarding the "correct response" when a relational attribution is made. Since the cause of the event is seen as occurring within the relationship, actions taken to improve an outcome also affect the relationship. Thus, when exploring which action steps to take to remedy a situation, the attributer needs to consider the relationship partner's possible reactions to any steps. The attributer is therefore likely to engage in extensive thought trials injected with uncertainty, since one can never be completely certain about another's reaction. For instance, if an employee wants to be more available for conversations with her supervisor, she must take his reactions into account. What will he think about her increased availability? Will he perceive her efforts as manipulative or sincere? Could such an action possibly make matters worse?

Granted, reactions associated with internal and external attributions may also be hard to predict. In response to negative feedback, one employee might consider leaving her job, while another might decide to improve her skill set through advanced training. Both options contain uncertainty: the one cannot be sure she will find a job elsewhere, and the other cannot be sure that training will be useful. Thus, all three loci of attributions can generate a certain level of uncertainty. However, we propose here that relational attributions lead to a specific type of uncertainty: *relational uncertainty*.

Based on uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), relationship communication researchers distinguish between three types of relational uncertainty: uncertainty about the self, uncertainty about the partner, and uncertainty about the relationship itself. Self-uncertainty refers to doubts about being involved in a relationship and the ability to execute desired actions. Partner uncertainty emerges from an inability to predict the partner's attitudes, values, and behaviors. Finally, relationship uncer-

tainty focuses on the dyad as a whole and encompasses the ambiguity people experience regarding the status of the relationship and their perceptions of it (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999).

With relational attributions, individuals must cope with all three levels of uncertainty and include them in their thought trials. An employee may attribute failure to meet a deadline to a lack of communication with his boss. To improve the communication pattern, he might consider sending her an email every morning informing her about the status of the project. Rising doubts and questions likely span all three uncertainty levels. First, the employee might have doubts about finding the time to send the emails (self-uncertainty). Second, he may be unclear about whether his boss will find the time to read the emails every morning (partner uncertainty). Finally, he may wonder whether such an action will initiate an exchange where his supervisor will provide regular updates and feedback and, ultimately, improve their communication (relationship uncertainty).

In addition to perceptions of uncertainty, relational attributions in response to negative events are also likely to induce feelings of anxiety, for two reasons. First, they threaten the stability of the relationship. Uncertainty about the nature of an interaction with a significant other can threaten assumptions about people's ability to predict and control their own lives (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), as well as their need for certainty in their relationships and their environment (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). This threat to one's values and needs is an aversive experience, which can often induce stress and anxiety (Lazarus, 1991) and, hence, can threaten the attributer's psychological well-being (e.g., Wright & Bonett, 2007). Uncertainty is a well-known workplace stressor and a common cause of anxiety (Garst, Frese, & Molenaar, 2000; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994), and relational uncertainty in particular has been shown to be related to negative emotions such as sadness and fear (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002).

Second, the threat of a malfunctioning or deteriorating relationship violates humans' innate need for belongingness. Baumeister and Leary (1995: 497) have provided compelling theoretical and empirical evidence that humans have a "pervasive drive" to form and maintain interpersonal bonds and experience emotional distress and anxiety at the prospect of a threatened relationship (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Making a relational attribution in response to a negative event makes salient the possibility of not being able to maintain the relationship, and since the relationship with one's supervisor is not easily substitutable (people may replace old friends with new friends but may not easily choose a different supervisor) and critical to one's goal achievement (e.g., with regards to merit increases and promotions), the relational attribution likely leads to feelings of anxiety over how to improve the relationship and continue to fulfill one's needs and goals. As Baumeister and Leary note, "People feel anxious at the prospect of losing important relationships" (1995: 506). Based on this discussion, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 6: In contemplating possible actions in response to making relational attributions, attributers experience (a) relational uncertainty and (b) anxiety.*

Relationship Work As a Behavioral Consequence of Relational Attributions

In early attribution research Weiner (1985) posited that attributions play a significant role in shaping an individual's expectation of success and, therefore, the individual's desire to expend effort on goal-directed activities. Most of Weiner's predictions were targeted at the *direction* or *amount*, not the *content*, of the effort. Relational attributions offer a unique opportunity not only to predict motivation levels but also to identify the specific behaviors relational attributers are likely to engage in. Generally, we propose that individuals are more likely to seek to proactively repair the relationship through relationship work when they make relational attributions than when they make internal or external attributions. Relationship work is focused on addressing the true underlying causes of relationship events in order to repair or strengthen the relational processes, as opposed to merely changing the façade of the relationship through superficial and less enduring strategies as impression management (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 2001). Because of their interdependent nature and basic need

for belonging, people have a basic interest in creating and maintaining well-balanced relationships in every aspect of their lives, including the workplace. The anxiety triggered by relational attributions motivates actions targeted at cultivating and avoiding breaks in existing relationships, as well as at regaining and restoring relational value (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Relational attributions direct employees' attention toward their relationships, making a commitment to relationship improvement more likely and improving the odds that employees will initiate the improvement process.

Just as internal attributions in a dyad trigger changes in the *self* (e.g., expending more effort) while external attributions trigger attempts to change the *other* or the *situation* (e.g., asking for more resources for a given project), relational attributions are likely to motivate changing the *relationship* in order to achieve desired outcomes. In making relational attributions, attributers will pay attention to the features of the relationship that could be enhanced (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals who make relational attributions are more likely to attend to, remember, and act on information that is relevant to their relationships (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999) and to expend effort toward developing a high-quality or workable relationship (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). By making relational attributions, individuals recognize the need to fix something on a relational level, and, as a consequence, multiple facets of the relationship can be improved. Relational attributions are unique in that they are associated with relationship schema, and, hence, attributers are made more aware of potential behaviors associated with improving or maintaining them (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

> Proposition 7: Relational attributions are more *likely to result in relationship work than are internal or external attributions.*

Relationship work may take two primary behavioral forms, and its exact nature depends on whether attributers perceive an event as arising from relational task or relational person concerns. First, individuals may approach their relationship partners, discuss their relevant task or person problems openly, and hope for the development of a mutually agreed-upon solution. This response follows Goffman's (1967) relationship restoration process, which opens with a challenge phase where "the offended party calls attention to the offender's misconduct" (Ren & Gray, 2009: 108–109). When an employee makes an attribution to the relationship with his or her supervisor, the employee cannot be sure that the supervisor will make the same attribution and may therefore choose to explicitly voice his or her concerns to the supervisor to identify whether the supervisor has made a similar attribution. The content of this initial conversation is likely going to reflect the specific task or person explanations inherent in the relational attribution.

The procedural choice literature suggests that the initiation of an informal discussion with the offending party—called "remedial voice"—is a common first step toward conflict management (Peirce, Pruitt, & Czaja, 1993). While remedial voice is more commonly studied in response to interpersonal mistreatment, such as verbal aggression and humiliation, its change-oriented and relational nature makes it applicable to our theory and plausible to assume that a conversation with the relationship partner to discuss and remedy the situation is a step commonly taken.

> Proposition 7a: *Relational task and relational person attributions may lead to task- or person-focused remedial voice behaviors, such as talking about the issue with the supervisor.*

Second, individuals may choose *not* to overtly express their attributions but may instead attempt to change the relationship by changing aspects of their own behavior, with the hope that the relationship partner will reciprocate. Since a relational attribution necessarily implicates aspects of the self, such a strategy without involving voice may be successful. While changing one's behavior is a common response to internal attributions, this same behavior in response to a relational attribution is intended to initiate a reciprocal exchange. This is similar to the relationship development process described by LMX theory where leaders provide followers certain levels of latitude, await follower reactions, and subsequently restrict or expand the latitude. Through ongoing exchanges the individuals in the relationship "test" one another; if the partner's response is positive, exchanges continue and the relationship develops into mutual trust,

affection, and loyalty (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997). In the above email example, the employee might decide to send a daily email to his supervisor summarizing the project's progress. If the supervisor reads the emails and responds with feedback and time-sensitive information important to the project, the exchange will likely continue and ultimately improve coordination and communication between the partners.

A specific type of behavior that may occur to initiate the relationship repair process is interpersonal citizenship behaviors (ICBs)—cooperative behaviors targeted at close others, such as coworkers and supervisors. ICBs take the form of providing assistance beyond one's job requirements, something that directly or indirectly enhances individual, team, and organizational performance (Bowler & Brass, 2006). Such behaviors notably occur in the context of interpersonal relationships (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002) and may be independent of organizational citizenship behaviors directed at the organization (Bowler & Brass, 2006). ICBs have been shown to have a stronger effect on such key organizational outcomes as performance, morale, and resource availability than other forms of citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Because of their positive contributions to coordination and the establishment of a favorable work climate, it seems likely that ICBs also lead to the development of high-quality interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

Task-focused ICBs involve "the resolution of work-related problems of a less personal nature," such as supplying information, offering advice, helping out with the completion of a concrete task, assuming responsibility for solving problems, and making improvement suggestions (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002: 256). Person-focused ICBs deal with problems associated with one's affiliations and social support systems at work and include listening, being available for emotional support, counseling, and demonstrating concern and respect for others. We suggest that individuals will engage in the citizenship behaviors that match the content of the relational attribution.

> _Proposition 7b: Relational task and relational person attributions may lead to changes to the self (e.g., task- and_

> _person-focused ICBs) in an effort to initiate a reciprocal exchange leading to a mutual relationship development process._

Relational attributions may not only lead to the types of positive and sincere relationship improvement efforts described here but may also trigger more negative behaviors, such as withdrawal and counterproductive work behaviors, for example, when the attributer believes nothing can be done to remedy the relationship. We have chosen to focus on relationship work because it is an outcome not previously captured by attribution theory and unique to relational attributions.

IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

General Implications

Today's organizations encompass increasingly interconnected networks built on numerous relationships. Management researchers acknowledge the increased complexity of work life by modeling how relationships develop, the ways information flows through networks, how influence is a function of network position and ties, and how relationships may best be conceptualized (Ferris et al., 2009; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, 2005; Young & Perrewé, 2000). Attribution theory to date is missing a systematic relational perspective. While some attempts have been made to consider the consequences of attributions in relationships, they have relied on the traditional internal and external distinction and, thus, have not been able to fully explain how attributions inform relationship dynamics in organizations. We hope this article pushes the boundaries of attribution theory by modeling how relational attributions can predict behaviors that are essential in forming high-quality relationships.

Adopting relational attributions as a third locus of causality has numerous theoretical implications for organizational research. By drawing on existing relational perspectives, we have established a theoretical rationale for the existence of relational attributions by differentiating them from internal and external attributions. As a result, this article can provide a more complete picture of the attribution process at work, as well as afford a better understanding of the

complexity with which attributions are made. By recognizing that individuals are motivated by their relationships with others and that these relationships influence attributional processes, we hope to broaden the applicability of attribution theory to current and future research questions, as well as enhance its predictive validity. In predicting relationship work such as voice and ICBs, relational attributions point to organizationally relevant outcomes that have not yet been considered in attribution theory. Moreover, they provide additional explanations for relationship-oriented behaviors in organizations and may aid in identifying specific conditions under which such behaviors flourish.

These contributions suggest an important managerial implication. For managers to be motivated to enhance the quality of their relationships with subordinates, they must first acknowledge that relational performance-impeding elements exist and that these elements may be proactively addressed through relationship work. The proposed existence of relational attributions suggests that performance-related feedback should focus on the relationships managers develop with their employees and the other relationships in which employees are embedded. When managers make relational attributions and would like their employees to make the same attributions, they may benefit from emphasizing employees' embeddedness within relationships (thus activating their relational selves) or from guiding their employees through Kelley's information dimensions. If both parties decide that the relationship needs to be improved, they can jointly engage in relationship work. Also, to ensure that employees feel comfortable using remedial voice to address their own relational attributions, managers may explicitly state and continuously emphasize their open-door policy and willingness to get input and feedback on any issue.

The primary contribution of this article is the inclusion of relational aspects in attribution theory. We believe that this addition holds important implications for the broader relational literature, which can draw on attribution theory and elements such as the loci of causality and Kelley's information categories to develop unique explanations for relationship work and development. For example, research on ICBs could benefit from an attributional perspective. Relational attributions may be an antecedent of ICBs, sug-

gesting that employees exhibit helping behaviors even in the face of negative events. ICBs are often conceptualized within a social exchange perspective, where employees perform helping behaviors as a way of reciprocating positive treatment they have received (Bowler & Brass, 2006). Our analysis suggests that ICBs may also be performed as a way to initiate relationship improvement in a negative situation, rather than to reciprocate what has been given. Adding relational attributions to the nomological network of ICBs could shed additional light on how organizations develop and sustain a positive social support climate.

In general, relational attributions have the potential to explain why some individuals are motivated to improve a bad or less than ideal relationship. Often, research focuses on *how* individuals can improve relationships (e.g., Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009); attribution theory is now formulated to describe *when* people are motivated to do so. Because relationships are critical to organizational functioning, understanding when individuals are willing to engage in relationship work is an important implication of our analysis.

Implications of Relational Attributions for Research Involving Dyads

To illustrate the wide-ranging potential of our theory to contribute to other literature, we discuss the theoretical implications for three distinct topics in the management field that we identify as part of the broader relational literature: leadership, teams, and social networks.

Implications for leadership research. Increasingly, leadership researchers recognize the interactive nature of the leader-follower relationship by acknowledging that followers actively shape what constitutes leadership (Avolio, 2007; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). LMX theory was among the first to acknowledge the relational basis of leadership, positing that leadership and influence emerge not merely as a result of certain leader or follower characteristics and behaviors but as a result of these individuals' interactions within their relationship (Dansereau, 1995; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Followers' relationships with their leaders are potent predictors for many important outcomes (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). It is not surprising that followers are highly attuned to

their relationships with leaders, since they may gain acceptance and access such benefits as plum assignments, pay raises, and promotions if the relationship is characterized by mutual trust, loyalty, respect, and extensive communication (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987). Followers' attention is often directed not only toward their leaders but also toward their *relationships* with their leaders, underscoring our argument that individuals often assign the cause of an event to the relationship itself.

To date, however, LMX research has mainly examined the dynamics of the leader-follower relationship in its initial stages, where interactions are particularly important in determining whether the follower will be a part of the ingroup or outgroup. It has long been assumed that LMX quality is quite stable over time once the relationship is established, but this assumption has not been supported by empirical research (Robert C. Liden, personal communication). For those studies where LMX quality was measured multiple times, stability in LMX relations was only moderate. For example, Bauer and Green (1996) measured LMX quality twice, once twelve weeks after follower entry and then again thirty-four weeks after entry, finding that the ratings correlated .54. Similarly, with a time span of one year, Epitropaki and Martin (2005) found a .64 correlation between LMX quality ratings over time. These results suggest what researchers in the communication literature have found—that relationships can grow and deteriorate over time (e.g., Hinde, 1997)—and the leadership literature would benefit greatly from understanding these fluctuations.

We believe that the concept of relational attributions may aid in developing new theory regarding relationship change. As indicated above, relational attributions help to identify the circumstances in which individuals would be motivated to improve an existing relationship and, because they trigger relationship work, may help explain how LMX quality may be sustained and how followers may potentially move from the outgroup to the ingroup (or vice versa). For example, relational attributions may contribute to the development of high-quality LMX relationships through their influence on member performance. Research has shown that members' performance becomes a key predictor of relationship quality once leaders and members have had time to interact (Nahrgang,

Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009). When employees make relational attributions, they are more likely to focus on the relational aspects of performance, possibly engaging in ICBs, which, in turn, influence performance ratings (Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008), enhancing the relationship quality. Thus, relational attributions may provide theoretical leverage for exploring how LMX quality can improve as a result of relational attributions.

In addition, understanding followers' attributions for success and failure may provide leaders with valuable insights about follower motivation and actions. While relationship work may be initiated solely by followers, the success of such improvement attempts is partially determined by leaders' willingness and ability to reciprocate the behavior and to initiate a dyadic problem-solving process by communicating openly and engaging in conflict resolution (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Leaders must be involved in any attempt at relationship repair. Relational attributions may explain the circumstances under which leaders are willing to engage in relationship work with followers (such as when they make relational attributions themselves). Identifying the antecedents of relational attributions is important to the leadership literature because it offers theoretical mechanisms through which leaders can influence followers' attributional processes (e.g., during a performance evaluation session).

Implications for team research. Although our discussion of relational attributions focused on dyads, this phenomenon may be relevant for research on teams as well. Most important, relational attributions may be invoked to explain intrateam causes of poor performance. Research examining the attributions made by teams in response to feedback found that teams generally share credit for good performance but single out individuals as the cause of poor performance (Dorfman & Stephan, 1984; Naquin & Tynan, 2003). Research on the latter case often focuses on reactions to the poorest-performing member of the team (Jackson & LePine, 2003; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Taggar & Neubert, 2004).

We suggest that this research could be enhanced by considering the interrelations between team members in seeking the cause of a team's poor performance, rather than viewing individuals as atomistic members of the team.

Much literature has examined the effects of team processes as the causes of team performance (for a review see Ilgen et al., 2005), some of which directly implicated relationships between team members (e.g., relationship conflict [Jehn, 1995]; psychological safety, "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" [Edmondson, 1999: 354]). However, these team processes have mostly been examined at the team level (e.g., examining the overall level of conflict within a team), neglecting to acknowledge that problems within teams may arise from specific dyadic relationships existing in the team. Because of the interdependence within a team, a dyad-level conflict may "poison" all team interactions and may ultimately result in poorer team performance. For example, a team consisting of diverse experts may fail to meet its performance goals because there is animosity between the team leader and one team member, who therefore fail to share critical information with each other. Such a coordination loss between the two individuals results in increased coordination demands for the others and, ultimately, an overall decrease in performance.

Therefore, instead of examining the team as a whole or focusing on individual team members as the causes of poor team performance, our analysis recommends examining whether team members make an attribution to a specific relationship within their team, which may generate relationship work from the team members involved in the dyad and also from the team members outside the dyad (e.g., voicing concerns toward the involved team members or attempting to mediate the conflict). Thus, relational attributions may provide a theoretical mechanism to explain when team members are motivated to focus on relational performance elements like coordination with other team members and may allow team researchers to identify the conditions under which constructive team process improvement takes place.

Implications for social network research. Social network theory suggests that individuals' success at work depends on a unique set of formal and informal relationships with other constituents (beyond the relationships with their boss or team members) of the organization (e.g., Brass, 1985; Granovetter, 1973). While strong ties characterized by emotional closeness and frequent interaction and reciprocation provide social support and better access to influence (Fer-

ris et al., 2009), weak ties ensure access to unique, diverse, and nonredundant information and can therefore increase domain-relevant knowledge and creativity (Granovetter, 1973; Perry-Smith, 2006).

Because some ties and nodes are more critical than others in determining a network's success, people within a given network may assign blame to a specific relationship (e.g., a weak tie between two nodes). For example, network members may argue that they failed to obtain a new client because the network member with a unique tie to the client's industry (i.e., the boundary spanner) did not obtain timely information owing to deteriorating communication between the member and the contact. While network theory and analysis generally focus on an overall set of relationships within either complete networks or egocentric networks, attributions for events may actually be made to very specific ties, which may then shed light on specific opportunities for social network improvements. In the above example, understanding the precise reason for losing a potential new client can motivate relationship work between the boundary spanner and his or her contact but also possibly between other boundary spanners and their connections in an effort to prevent potential relational troubles.

The above sections have provided details on how dyadic relational attributions are essential for understanding important organizational behaviors. Without providing the same level of detail, we would suggest that topics such as mentoring, socialization, and managing conflict involve relationship activity and may thus also benefit from the new relational perspective gained within attribution theory. A better understanding of how relational attributional processes impact affect, cognition, and behaviors will be helpful to many aspects of our discipline.

Implications for Levels of Analysis Beyond the Dyad: Reflections on One-to-Many Relationships

So far, we have focused only on relationships between two individuals. But, of course, relationships also exist at other levels of analysis, and to begin to illustrate how our theory may be applied to these other levels, we would like to highlight the implications of our theory for rela-

tionships where one partner is not an individual.

While individuals often derive significant meaning from the relationships they have with other individuals (e.g., supervisor, coworkers), their relationships to higher-level entities, such as the groups and communities they are a part of, may also critically influence their cognitions, affect, behaviors, and attributions (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Moreover, individuals may anthropomorphize these units at higher levels (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007); by viewing the organizations they belong to as unified entities, individuals may be even more likely to view their interactions with them in terms of relationships. For example, person-group fit research would suggest that employees may attribute problems within a group to their own lack of fit with the group's culture or value system (Kristof, 1996). Rather than considering the group's values and beliefs as "wrong" (and, thus, invoking an external attribution), individuals may simply perceive that their values and the group's values are inconsistent. As such, the attribution for lack of fit would be to the relationship between the individual and the group, rather than simply to the individual (internal) or the group (external). Although individuals may seek an opportunity to exit the group as a consequence of this relational attribution, they may also pursue relationship work, if they perceive that their efforts may bring about conciliation between their and the group's values and beliefs. Moreover, the group may make the same relational attribution and decide to voice concerns toward the group member in an effort to initiate a resolution process.

Individuals' relationships to collectives may also be interpreted through the lens of social network theory. For example, a person's position within a given network can be meaningfully described by his or her network centrality, broadly defined as "individuals' degree of access to others within emergent intraorganizational networks" (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). Central individuals gain more access to information and control resources like information more easily (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). They are more creative (Perry-Smith, 2006), perceive their job as similar to objective reality (Dean & Brass, 1985), are perceived as having higher status (Ibarra, 1992), and receive more influence and promotions (Brass, 1985). Thus, position within a

social network can be seen as a contributing factor to career success or failure. For instance, employees may blame being passed over for a promotion on a lack of connections with key constituents in the organization or on low network centrality, both of which reduce access to valuable information. The attribution refers to the employee's position within a social network and his or her embeddedness within a set of relationships, and we would therefore define it as a relational attribution.

The relational attribution here can again help explain when individuals are motivated to change their network position. A relational attribution with regard to network position could motivate employees to actively engage in networking behaviors to build a network suitable for goal achievement. Social network theory may draw on this extended attribution theory in order to identify the circumstances under which individuals are motivated to improve their social capital. Explicitly engaging in a conversation about social capital with employees gives leaders the chance to provide feedback about relational aspects of performance and to highlight potential performance improvement opportunities. Doing so provides the feedback-rich environment that is important for employee development (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).

These descriptions suggest that relational attributions may contribute to research examining relationships at higher levels of analysis. However, our suggestions remain largely speculative in nature, and we would like to offer some caveats regarding our theory's extension to higher levels of analysis. Our theory highlights the often reciprocal nature of relationship work where—to be successful—both relationship partners need to contribute. Considering a group or network as a relationship partner poses the question of to what extent collectives are actually able to engage in relationship work. As suggested by groups researchers, collectives of individuals can have personalities and feelings and exhibit behaviors toward others (including group members) through the establishment of norms, routines, and habits (e.g., Cole, Walter, & Bruch, 2008; George, 1990; Hofmann & Jones, 2005; Pearsall & Ellis, 2011). For example, in their discussion of the emergence of collective constructs, Morgeson and Hofmann posit that "as interaction occurs within larger groups of individuals, a structure of collective

action emerges that transcends the individuals who constitute the collective" (1999: 252). However, the processes with which groups act may not be isomorphic to individuals' behaviors. Similarly, the mechanisms with which relational attributions are formed and shape group dynamics may be different from the ones put forth in this article. For example, Kelley's dimensions of consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus could be interpreted differently at higher levels of analysis when considering group-level outcomes (e.g., consensus may refer to the extent to which other groups have experienced a similar event). An extension of our dyadic theory to higher levels of analysis should therefore only proceed with caution and should take into consideration our field's rich knowledge of multilevel theorizing (e.g., Mathieu & Chen, 2011; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We introduced boundary conditions at the beginning of our theoretical analysis to restrict our focus, and these constraints require some comments. First, we recognize that people receive both positive and negative feedback. While the latter is more likely to result in attributional analysis because of the desire to avoid similar situations in the future, it is also true that people may analyze positive events, especially if they were unexpected. Positive goal discrepancies can have motivating forces (e.g., Ilies & Judge, 2005), but the mechanisms by which they operate may be different. Although relational attributions for positive events are not as likely to impact an attributer's behaviors as strongly as relational attributions for negative events, we suspect that unique relationship-focused behaviors may still emerge. For example, if an employee receives positive feedback from his supervisor, engages in the attribution process, and makes a relational attribution, he may subsequently engage in relationship work to maintain the relationship with his supervisor. Realizing the benefits of positive relationships as a result of the relational attribution, he may also engage in relationship work targeted at other important relationships, such as his relationship with his supervisor's manager. Moreover, when a relational attribution occurs in response to a promotion, the employee may decide to "pay-it-forward" and engage in relationship work with

other employees, realizing how critical it is to their subsequent success. These ideas are speculative, and we encourage future work to examine relational attributions in response to both positive and negative events.

Second, we focused on one's supervisor as the bearer of bad news. However, one can receive performance-related feedback from peers, subordinates, and other organizational members. We suspect that the power of the other party influences the attributional process, but we are unsure exactly how that influence affects relational attributions.

Third, we focused on the attributional process where feedback involves interpersonal relations. Many people work in contexts or on tasks with machinery or technology where the task itself provides feedback. Other people have solitary jobs; many people now work at home away from coworkers. Certainly, relational attributions are less likely to occur in these contexts with few interpersonal interactions.

Fourth, we primarily discussed situations where individuals make only one attribution. People often have multiple attributions for performance-related events, however, and feel more or less confident about any given one. Thus, the overall frequency and strength of relational attributions compared to and/or combined with internal and external attributions need to be examined further.

Fifth, our theory proposes a relationship between relational attributions and relationship work, without going on to explain the circumstances under which relationship work is more or less likely to successfully improve the relationship. For example, relationship work may be less successful if it requires employees to present themselves in unusual, new, and unfamiliar ways. Under such circumstances, self-presentation requires more self-regulatory effort, which may interfere with subsequent and continuous relationship efforts (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Alternatively, relationship work success may depend on individuals' level of political skill—the ability to "adjust their behavior to different and changing situational demands in a manner that appears to be sincere, inspires support and trust, and effectively influences and controls the responses of others" (Ferris et al., 2009: 291–292). If relationship work is not perceived as sincere because of low political skill,

employees' efforts may backfire and further threaten their relationship.

Finally, we chose to focus solely on the locus of causality dimension, without systematically integrating relational attributions with the other causality dimensions. Weiner and colleagues (1971) drew on the various attributional dimensions to model how the consequences of an attribution may only be understood fully when examining different dimensions in combination. We chose to focus on the general consequences of relational attributions but acknowledge potential interactions with perceptions of controllability, stability, and globality, as well as with the other loci of causality (internal and external attributions).

We see the issues mentioned above as possible avenues for future research. However, we believe that because of the newness of the relational attributions construct, empirical validation research is initially necessary to both measure relational attributions and test the propositions put forth in this article. The greatest challenge is to demonstrate how people freely and spontaneously make relational attributions without being prompted by guided questions or scaled items. We would suggest that empirical research begin with qualitative study designs where people are asked to make attributions for situations in which they receive negative feedback from a supervisor/leader. Follow-up studies could more precisely test propositions about the causes of relational attributions by manipulating aspects of the event (e.g., consensus, consistency, distinctiveness) in scenarios or in an experimental context, as well as personal attributes (e.g., relational self) and contextual variables (e.g., interdependence). Attributions about the locus of causality (internal, external, relational) could be assessed by rating open-ended responses to questions about causes, or by using traditional attributional measurement techniques such as scales (Elig & Frieze, 1979; Kent & Martinko, 1995). Researchers could manipulate the attribution or provide attributions in scenarios to measure study participants' attitudinal and behavioral responses.

CONCLUSION

In a recent review of the applications of attribution theory to industrial and organizational psychology, Martinko and colleagues concluded that the majority of recent attribution research attempts to apply the traditional attribution paradigm to new phenomena "without a concurrent effort to enhance or make modifications to attribution theory per se" (2006: 173). With this article we have attempted to break from that pattern by examining attribution theory from a relational perspective. Following the trend in management literature examining the effects of employees' relationships at work (e.g., Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Johns, 2006), we extend the conceptual domain of attributions by introducing a new category, relational attributions, to the locus of causality dimension. With the addition of a third category, attribution theory may account for more variance in important employee outcomes and predict previously neglected but organizationally critical outcomes, such as relationship work. Since employees are often motivated by relationships with others, the theoretical refinement of attribution theory could elevate it to a major motivational theory in organizational behavior (Martinko et al., 2006).

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