

Influence of Long-standing, Formal Groups on Attribution Formation and Expression

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Abstract

In modern organizations, groups and teams cooperate, interact, and work very closely together over an extended period. With these long-standing, formal groups, individual members become inextricably bound to the other members, group cognitive processes, and outcomes experienced by the group. This article explores our current understandings of attributions and interpretive interactions of formal group and proposes refinement due to group dynamics, behavior, and cognition associated with long-lived groups. While group attribution research is extensive, causal ascriptions and reflective sense-making efforts in these formal groups are likely quite different when compared to that of more casual, shorter-lived groups. Two perspectives are utilized to illustrate these variations. The first perspective deals with members' dual concerns of ego protection and enhancement versus group interdependence, harmony, and long-term productivity/performance. A typology of attributions and interpretations that are formed and shared within groups is proposed and implications are discussed. The second perspective pertains to the possibility of various departures from the careful, rational information processing that has dominated existing attribution literature. A number of heuristic and limited processing attributions are suggested and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Attributions, Groups, Teams, Self-Serving Bias, Group-Serving Bias, Limited Rationality, Heuristics

Introduction

Managers have learned that work groups and teams can positively impact quality, creativity and innovation, perspective, efficiency, information transfer, morale, and job satisfaction, among other things (Guzzo & Shea, 1992; Richter, Dawson, & West, 2011). Researchers in social psychology and organizational behavior have advanced understanding of the influence groups have on individual cognition and behavior, but many issues lie unresolved. There has been a great deal of research on attributions within groups (e.g. Zaccaro, Peterson, & Walker, 1987; Schlenker, 1975; Goncalo & Duguid, 2008). In modern organizations, however, groups and teams often work together closely for years and even decades, developing group identities, interpretations, procedures, processes, and cultures. Individual psychological needs that typically guide causality attribution and outcome interpretation (e.g. the self-serving bias) are likely altered by such important considerations as group identification, group standing, group cohesiveness, and perhaps most importantly, future performance of the group.

These "long-standing, formal groups" are defined here as being a number of people who communicate on a regular basis, who are normally or regularly in close proximity of one another, and who work interdependently over extended periods of time toward accomplishment of common goals and mutual interests. The groups could be boards of directors, committees, top management teams, quality teams or circles, sales or project teams, close-knit departments, or other long-term work groups. Many groups in organizational settings are less formal, less interdependent, and less cohesive, but these more meaningful and longer-lived groups are very common today and it is very important that we better understand their cognitive processes. It would seem that such groups wield especially powerful influences on individual cognition and behavior and thus should be given special attention (George, 1990; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; De Cremer, 2000).

The primary purpose of this article is to explore the varied influences of long-standing, formal work groups and teams on causal attributions and on the sharing and expression of attributions to other members of the group as part of the sense-making, interpretive, and reality-building processes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995; Taggar & Neubert, 2004). Though attributional processes have been researched in more loosely knit groups (e.g. Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook, & Crook, 2014; Schlenker, 1975), proper attention has not been given to attributions made about the outcomes experienced by members of (longer-lived) formal work groups (Martinko, Harvey, & Dasborough, 2011; Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007). Harvey et al. (2012) recommend that researchers begin to look more at the applications of attribution theory in modern organizational scenarios such as human resources, management teams, and small businesses. Other researchers (e.g., Ferris et al., 2009; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Harvey et al., 2014) agree that group settings such as work teams are critical components of work life and thus deserve more research in terms of how attribution and other cognitive processes influence decisions and interactions.

This article adds to the existing literature on attribution theory by proposing two major perspectives on how long-standing, formal work groups can significantly alter attributional and behavioral predictions made by existing research. Several different issues for future research are proposed within each perspective. First is a review of the attribution literature and suggestion that the long-term, formalized group arrangement can greatly influence the existence of the well-researched self-serving and group-serving bias (Zacarro et al., 1987; Uraz & Aydin, 1995). A typology of attributions available to a group member is proposed to aid the discussion on attributions within formal groups and some matters for future research are proposed. Secondly, the paper proposes that long-term group interaction offers a prime opportunity for less rational, heuristic attributional processes (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002) not noted in the classical attribution literature. Throughout the paper, research propositions appropriate for future empirical research are presented in bold text.

Attribution Theory Research

The attribution theory literature has been rather effective in its attempts to describe and understand the processes by which individuals consider their performance outcomes, formulate causal ascriptions and understandings for those outcomes, and adjust behavior and affective reactions with respect to the causal ascriptions and expectancies for future outcomes (Crant & Bateman, 1993; Evans, 1986; Judge & Martocchio, 1996; Martinko & Gardner, 1982; Porac, Ferris, & Fedor, 1983; Weiner, 1985). A person's self-attributions affect their expectancy for future success and failure (Dorfman & Stephan, 1984), which will lead to certain behaviors,

affective reactions, and outcomes. There has also been a great deal of research regarding the attributions others (such as supervisors or team members) make for the behaviors or performance of employees (Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowildo 2002). Such outcomes impact subsequent attributions and behavior (Dorfman & Stephan, 1984; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

A great deal of this literature has focused on individual achievement motivation in performance situations. When individuals with higher levels of achievement motivation experience successful individual performance, they tend to attribute success to the internal dimensions of ability and effort (Weiner et al. 1987; Weiner, 1979; Weiner, 1985). When failure is encountered, it is typically ascribed to either an unstable, internal cause such as lack of effort or being tired, or to an external cause. This tendency, known as the self-serving bias, has been introduced as a critical construct relating to individual attributions for performance outcomes and is caused by a need to protect the ego from assault (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Shennan, 1995; Miller & Ross, 1975; Silver, Mitchell, & Gist, 1995). Most individuals have a self-serving tendency to ascribe favorable outcomes to internal causes and unfavorable outcomes to external causes (Powers & Douglas, 1983; Zuckerman, 1979). This bias has been discussed in great detail with respect to individuals formulating attributional reactions to performance encounters (Arnold, 1985; Miller & Ross, 1975; Silver et al., 1995).

Some researchers have suggested that the self-serving bias can be extended to group settings where individuals might attribute unfavorable outcomes to another team member (Schlenker, 1975). Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder and Elliot (1998) suggest that self-serving bias might not be as strong in terms of intergroup relationships. Individual thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors are closely linked to group membership and success, especially when the members intensely interact daily over an extended period of time. Interdependence, comradery, and future team performance seemingly play a key role in attribution and sense-making efforts. The interpersonal and sociological considerations of emotion, affect, attachment, interpersonal relationships, interdependence, group image and identity, and future team performance must come under consideration (Carlston & Shovar, 1983; Landis & Scalet, 1994; Miller & Schlenker, 1985; Mullen & Riordan, 1988; Zaccaro et al., 1987).

It is also argued that the formalized, long-standing group arrangement offers a variety of added opportunities to depart, under certain circumstances, from the rational information processing model of attribution. Following the traditions of the bounded rationalists (e.g. Cyert & March, 1959; March & Simon, 1958), it appears that certain attributions made by individuals in the presence of group activity are subject to less-than-fully complete and rational processes. Harvey and colleagues (2014) issue a call for additional attribution research considering that organizational members don't always make a careful and rational search for causality. Depending on the circumstances of the performance outcome, thorough and effective processing might be replaced by functional and efficient processing. The process by which a person arrives at an attribution will not always follow what Lord and Maher (1990) refer to as "a rational model of causal explanation." Rational models, which have dominated attribution research, work under the assumption that people thoroughly process all useful information available in an attempt to maximize a relevant outcome. In contrast, limited rationality models focus on how individuals have a tendency to simplify and distort information processing in an attempt to generate satisfactory or functional, but not optimal, behavior and cognition. Among other things, this work reiterates that the formal group setting could provide opportunities to utilize cognitive heuristics and simplify knowledge structures to reduce information processing and time demands (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gilovich et al., 2002; Taggar & Neubert, 2004).

Interpersonal Relationships, Performance, and the Self-Serving Bias: A Forum for Interpretive Exchange

The individual generally desires, if possible, to maintain harmonious and productive relationships with the extended, formal work group. Over time, the formal work group becomes like family, inextricably bound to and an extension of the individual. Much of the individual's reality and interpretations are derived from that of the work group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). There is a shared interdependence with an implied requirement to look out for one another and to share information, interpretation, and feedback about each other and the environment the group faces together (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Derlega, Walmer, & Furman, 1973). Eberly, Holley, Johnson and Mitchell (2011) stress that these kinds of interpretive decisions and interactions must be viewed from the perspective of their impact on relationships, along with the more traditional internal and external causality perspectives.

Teams seek causal understanding for important outcomes and this process has a significant influence on the group's overall satisfaction, achievement motivation, and identity. (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Taggar & Mitchell, 2004; Eberly et al., 2011; Healey, Vuori, & Hodkinson, 2015). Groups work together to develop causal ascriptions for collective outcomes. Over the years there has been a great deal of research looking at collective, interpretive, sense-making efforts of groups (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Weick, 1995; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, 2008; Goncalo & Duguid, 2008; Healey et al., 2015).

Often a great deal of time and energy is spent sharing such thoughts and feelings, including expressions of perceived causal explanations for success and failure (Feldman, 1984; George, 1990; Hackman, 1976; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977, 1978). Imamoglu (1991) and Uraz and Aydin (1995) explained that extensive communication and interaction in groups is often mandatory in reaction to performance outcomes. The expressions made from time to time, especially concerning significant events and outcomes, are expected to influence assessments of group harmony, outcomes, causal attributions, and resulting affect, in addition to the performance/success evaluations of the event (Healey et al., 2015).

Derlega and colleagues (1973), Uraz and Aydin (1995), and Landis and Scalet (1994) note that situational variables such as the perceived similarity of and dependence upon fellow group members and the long-term impact on the group, compel individuals even more strongly to share their personal interpretations of certain events and entities. Lazega (1990) explains that the group sets out to interpret the overwhelming ambiguity of the work environment as a group, relying on each other's judgments and expressions as a supplement to their own interpretations.

Overall then, practitioners and researchers should recognize **that formal groups working together over time will be compelled much more than individual workers or members of casual, ad hoc, or short-term groups to assess causality of group outcomes and express openly their causal evaluations of such outcomes.**

"Why" is a much larger question in the realm of the long-standing, formal group. The question looms, however, whether objectivity and truthfulness are the number one priority in these active searches for causation, explanation, and implication. How accurate and truthful are the causal explanations being offered and are they biased?

Toward Harmony, Responsibility, and Identity

Based on the person's strong identification with the group, the long-term formal interaction and interdependence, and the fact that there comes a lack of distinction between group and personal goals, it appears likely that, win or lose, members of a group are "in it together." The individual's outcomes are closely related to the group's outcomes, so an honest,

complete, accurate appraisal would seem a reasonable, if not optimal, solution. **It is expected that the causal interpretations of members of long-standing groups will be forthright and honest accounts of reality.**

Responsibility attributions cannot simply reflect the self-serving or egocentric nature of individuals if the long-term, consistent success of the formal group is considered. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) speaks of the person's efforts to identify closely with group members. Doise (1988) notes that people use a number of categorization schemes in order to understand others. People assign themselves, as well as others, to categories in order to ascribe meaning to those who have been assigned. A person's definition and understanding of self becomes closely related to the group categorization and its related characteristics. Group membership becomes a major source of affect, emotion, and value significance. Self-interest (egocentrism), then, is tied to the characteristics and actions of others. **Because of their close identification with the group and internalization of group goals and values, responsibility for success and failure, either individually or as part of the group, or some subset of the group, must be claimed from time-to-time by each group member.**

Researchers have extended the work on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) by looking at interpersonal citizenship behaviors (ICBs) within formalized work groups (e.g., Bowler & Brass, 2006; Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). These behaviors are similar to extraordinary and uncompensated helpful behaviors meant for the well-being of the organization, but are directed toward fellow group members and the team (through the existing interpersonal relationships) instead of toward the global organization. Bowler and Brass (2006) found that attributions within the group influence these ICB's and have an influence on the positive group relationship. Research has generally found, or at least implied, that attributions promoting internal group harmony and group standing, positively influencing the future performance of the group, and leading to improved interpersonal relationships, also lead to a variety of positive organizational outcomes (Martinko, Moss, Douglas, & Borkowski, 2007). For example, workers are more likely to remain with the team and the organization for extended periods of time (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004) and can lead to higher performance levels and better overall attitudes by the workers (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson, 2005).

Attributions: Public and Private

Success and failure (credit and blame) become much more of a collective encounter in longer-lived, formal groups. One could argue, however, that public expressions are impression-management or relationship-enhancing tools and that private attributions that impact personal ego and self-esteem differ from public expressions. A number of studies have demonstrated that members of sports teams often fail to utilize the self-serving bias in their public expressions only because they want to present an image of "modesty." (Gergen & Taylor, 1969; Zaccaro et al., 1987). Schlenker and Miller (1977) contend that group members prefer images of modesty to images of boastful conceit, arguing that public attributions are expressed for purposes of creating favorable impressions. In long-standing groups and with increased responsibility to the group, careful and truthful interpretations become more necessary and useful. There will be much less of group members "saying one thing out loud and thinking another." **Over time, outward expressions made by group members to the team more consistently reflect true internal assessments.**

This is especially true when the interpretations are being made within the context of the group and are based on group performance feedback. Social identity implies that group

performance defines individual performance. An honest, complete, accurate appraisal is prized by everyone and is utilized to improve future performance. It can be expected that members will attempt such an appraisal to the extent that information processing capabilities allow. In such an interdependent and long-lived arrangement as the work group, ego protection biases cannot always predominate. Formal group membership is not unlike marriage in that the distinction between the goals of the individuals and the goals of the institution becomes dim. Marriage counselors and therapists reveal that secret feelings, thoughts, and behaviors do not stay concealed forever. In a formal group, much like in a marriage, it is now “us” rather than “you and me.”

Social exchange becomes the basis for both a socially constructed interpretation of work place characteristics and events and a basis by which individuals assess their own performance and adjust future efforts. The group’s social exchange becomes the basis for feelings of satisfaction and the drive for motivation. The sharing of attributions can be viewed as an additional feedback mechanism. Harmony is important for the group, but accurate feedback concerning group outcomes is valued since consistent future success may depend on appropriate incorporation of feedback. Therefore, group members can be expected to at least attempt a more unbiased, accurate, and informative review. It would seem, then, that public attributions are not censored or edited versions of the private ones.

What about Ego Protection and Enhancement?

The self-serving bias has been developed in humans for a reason: internal responsibility attributions for failure are painful to the individual's ego. But work by Latane, Williams and Harkins (1979) suggests that in groups, failure may not be as painful and success may not be as glorious. Individuals working in groups diffuse the responsibility for group action. This phenomenon has been used to explain social loafing, poor (or non-existent) performance due to the fact that blame cannot be easily assigned to a single person (Latane et al., 1979). Blame and negative affect from failure are shared. Mynatt and Sherman (1975) suggest that members of groups may feel less personal threat from failure than individuals performing alone. They add that group members utilize the comfort of the diffused responsibility to attempt more risky or dangerous actions. In their empirical research, acceptance of responsibility for success and failure was common and seemingly did little to injure the ego of the individuals. Also in a group, there appears to be more of a “future orientation” in which causality ascription serves as an important source of information to educate and improve future group performance.

Also, it seems that an individual would receive much less glory from taking personal credit for a group success than does a member of a group who takes personal credit for personal success. Self-serving attributions for success may not be as valuable in a group situation, especially when it is not as obvious that the individual’s efforts did anything in particular to cause the success. This discussion implies a notion of “high risk, high reward” associated with personal performance. Under conditions of high-risk individual performance, the egocentric or self-serving bias may be especially helpful. **In a well-established group setting there will be much less incentive to ascribe causation egocentrically (self-serving) as personal success is not as glorious and failure is not nearly as painful.**

Group acceptance and approval, and productive interaction with the group, can boost an individual's ego. Group success under these circumstances is very similar to personal success. Tajfel’s (1974) and Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) work on social identity demonstrates how self-esteem and personal pride are enhanced under group circumstances. Attributions made by a member for a group’s performance will be based partially on the status of the group relative to

other similar groups/rival groups. Specifically, Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that the individual's "social identity" will have a profound impact on the attributions made by him/her. The group-serving bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hewstone & Jaspars, 1982) is the tendency of group members to ascribe success to efforts of the group and to blame failure on some external cause. The group then, can become the major determinant of self-esteem and social identity rather than the self. Any factors that cause or intensify in-group identification increase, by definition, the importance of the group in determining a member's self-esteem. So, as a matter of summarizing, we might propose that **as long-term groups become more formal and interdependent, the tendency to base personal causal attributions and interpretations on group interests (such as long-term group performance and success) increases relative to personal interests (self-serving bias).**

Tajfel and Turner (1979) contend that group members can maintain or enhance their self-esteem by increasing the positiveness and/or decreasing the negativeness associated with their social category. Hewstone and Jaspars (1982) reported additionally that attributions for the achievement of in-group members will be made so as to favor the in-group image while attributions for the achievement of out-group members will be made so as to derogate the out-group image. This ethnocentric or group-serving bias serves to enhance self-esteem through the group, and thus, possibly explains lack of regard for ego-enhancement on a personal level (Beatson & Halloran, 2013).

A Typology of Attributions Available to Group Members

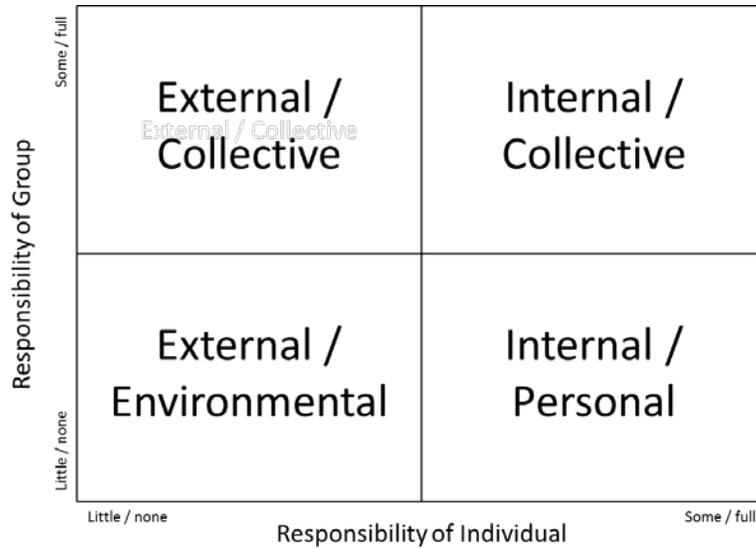
In order to fully discuss the attributions made by individuals (privately and publicly) for group outcomes, the simple distinction of internal versus external attributions is limited (Eberly et al., 2011; Harvey et al., 2014). Causes of behavior can be due to the actor, the social situation, various intervening factors and considerations, relationships among organizational members, and/or the interactive or interdependent combinations of all factors. Social outcomes can be attributed internally, to the group including the self, or externally with the group either involved or not involved (Lazega, 1990; Miller & Schlenker, 1985; Uraz & Aydin, 1995; Zaccaro et al., 1987).

This work borrows from several other studies in an effort to construct an appropriate typology of attributions in a well-established, formal group (Miller & Schlenker, 1985; Zaccaro et al., 1987; Eberly, et al., 2011). A typology is presented and questions are introduced that should be answered in future research in the context of longer-term, formal groups. The first distinction in the proposed typology refers to whether or not the attributor him/herself was responsible for the outcome. This part can be termed either internal or external. Internal means the individual making the attribution is at least partially responsible for the outcomes, and external means he/she is not. The second distinction in each type refers to the extent that other group members were responsible for the outcome. This part of the attribution can be either personal, meaning no other group member beyond the attributor is responsible; collective, meaning other group members were responsible; or environmental, meaning no group members at all were responsible. In putting the two distinctions together, only collective can be combined with both internal and external, since it is inherent that the attributor is a group member also.

Therefore, a typology of four types is provided: internal/personal, internal/collective, external/collective, and external/environmental. Note that within each of these categories, the ascribed cause can be either stable or unstable, for example involving skill (stable) or

luck/conditions (unstable) (Weiner, 1985) and could potentially change with the addition of new information (Lau, 1984).

Figure 1: A Typology of Possible Attributions by Group Members



The first attribution type available is internal/personal which is akin to the traditional internal attribution. A group member could take personal credit for the group’s success or failure without significant consideration of the contributions or collective effort of other team members. A member of a sales team could attribute the company’s winning a large account simply to his/her planning and personal relationship with key representatives of the account. One way to describe this could be through a statement such as “our group succeeded or failed and my contributions were the primary reason why.” In sports, we often hear very influential team members such as a coach or star player take the blame for team failure with statements like “I didn’t coach well enough or I didn’t bring my A-game today.”

A group member can also attribute success to the uniquely combined effort or ability of the entire group, including in this attribution contributions made by him/herself. This attribution type would be termed an internal/collective attribution. Such an attribution would include abilities and effectiveness afforded by the unique combination of members’ efforts or ability as a group. Very little emphasis, however, would be placed on the contributions of particular individuals on the team. This attribution implies a latent, cultural, and almost magical “synergistic” or group force that determines success or failure. Success or failure was due to a number of factors working together in the appropriate way. Further, the attribution implies a degree of complementary “fit” among team members. Member talents and effort together result in synergy, where the individuals are most valuable when their efforts are joined as a team. This attribution appears especially healthful and appealing because it implies the desired esprit de corps, culture, and cooperation. Examples of these attributions include team resource/talent coordination, team effort, a great deal of team practice and rehearsal, shared task dedication, or team cohesiveness. For example, the sales representative above might attribute repeated success to “a remarkable ability to make the most of ideas we generate.” An NBA star might insist that “the team works well together and we each contribute in our own special way.” A star quarterback might say “my teammates make me better.” A board chairman might report that her

board or top management team has remarkably congruent and complementary abilities and critical experience, with the result being remarkable performance.

Failure could be attributed in the same manner, referring to some cause related to the combination of group members as a team. For example, top managers are often replaced because the organization was performing poorly and the reason was latent or not apparent. Coaches are replaced because they “weren't creating the culture and environment we had hoped for.” The strategy literature implies (e.g. Daily, 1995; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990) that top management serves a symbolic role in many cases. When the combination of group or organization resources fails, it might be difficult to pinpoint the exact cause and thus the manager must take the blame. One often hears explanations that reflect such thinking: “the team chemistry and culture was not moving in the right direction” or “they did not gel as a group.” One way to describe this could be through a statement such as “our group succeeded because we're a really good team and our members all contribute to the overall success. My contributions might've had something to do with it, but they are just a small yet important part of a bigger dynamic.”

Next, a group member can attribute success to the group, making little reference to contributions made by him/herself. This type of attribution might be termed an external/collective attribution. In effect, the attributor is losing his/her personal identity (though still including him/herself in the group) when responsibility is assigned in such a manner. This type of attribution could not only refer to the group as a whole (excluding the attributor), but could also refer to certain sub-groups or individuals within the group (excluding the attributor). The sales representative could report that “the long hours put in by Jim and Nancy in developing the presentation put the sales team over the top.” Similarly, a group member can blame some individual or perhaps a sub-group to which one does not belong.

Finally, a group member could make a truly external attribution of success or failure. This sort of attribution would make no reference whatsoever to him/herself or to the group to which the individual belongs. An attribution like this might be termed an external/environmental attribution. The cause of success or failure with this attribution was external to the group altogether. Note that this type entails all luck attributions and all task difficulty attributions. For example, the NBA player's individual luck or the team's fate would both be termed external/environmental (Weiner, 1985). The speculations that “the prospective client was just not in a position to buy” or that “the bad economic environment had the client in a cautious posture” could be termed external/environmental attributions. One way to describe this could be through a statement such as “we succeeded or failed on this task, but it was really something out there beyond us, and not so much because of anything we did or did not do.” We often hear team members talking about “we did all we could do today and it just wasn't enough...it just wasn't to be.” Even though this type of attribution might be viewed as an internal/collective attribution, it does have an element of “it just wasn't our day” and the outcome was somehow beyond the control of the team.

Attributions' Impact on Group Relations and Other Outcomes

Even though there are clear implications of the above attributions typology to personal, group, and organizational outcomes, there is great need for further empirical research within the context of long-standing, formal groups to make complete sense of these implications. Past research has looked closely at attributions in group settings, but there are a lot of conflicting results and nuances and we need to extend research to longer-lived, formal groups. Forsyth and Mitchell (1979), for example, found predictably, that those members of groups who claimed too much credit for group success and regularly shirked blame for failure, were less favorably

evaluated than those who either employed an equalitarian approach or those who took personal blame for failure and attributed success to the team. Miller and Schlenker (1985) noted, also predictably, that unfavorable evaluations resulted when one takes what was considered by the group to be too much personal credit for success. Forsyth and Mitchell (1979) and Mullen and Riordan (1988) argued, however, that it is not clear that those who personally accept all the blame and ascribe all the success to the team (especially on multiple occasions) are favored more than those who make more balanced attributions. They argue that in on-going, group memberships there is a need to share in both success and failure since team members are “in it together for the long-term.” We might also add the likelihood that absolute accuracy of attributions and interpretations has become much more important to the consistent success of the group going forward.

Beatson and Halloran (2013) discuss the collective social identity that is created within a group, and the self-preservation instinct that the group will engage in to protect that identity, suggesting that this helps to promote external causation for failures. Khan and Liu (2008) and Hunter, Reid, Stokell, and Platow (2000) found, similarly, that groups would tend to emphasize the internal for successes, and reach outward for explanations for failure, in an attempt to protect the group image or identity. Some attribution research, however, has found that careful searches and causal attributions are internally focused by members of the team in terms of reasons for failure, presumably as a self-corrective or “collective mindfulness” mechanism, as an attempt to incorporate collective experience into the improvement process (Weick, 1995). Dorfman and Stephan (1984) and Naquin and Tynan (2003), for example, found that formal teams will regularly share the credit for positive outcomes but seek carefully to pinpoint internal factors or weak individual contributions as the reasons for failure. Jackson and LePine (2003), LePine and Van Dyne (2001), and Taggar and Neubert (2004) determined that teams routinely look throughout the group for the specific causes of failure or “weakest links” when ascribing failure. This might seem counter-productive to group identity and positive group relations discussed thus far, but the positive “collective mindfulness” and self-corrective impact on future performance becomes much more important in these long-standing groups. As we also stated earlier, in longer-term, formal groups the personal failure is viewed as less hurtful if the group benefits and learns from the failure in the long run.

Forsyth and Mitchell (1979) and Carlston and Shovar (1983), among others, propose additionally that there is a need in groups for a healthy balance of individual credit for success and blame for failure. Carlston and Shovar (1983) found that individuals actually enhance their acceptance and popularity when they take some responsibility for success as well as failure. They explain that these collective experiences of “ups and downs” build cohesiveness, demonstrating capability as well as vulnerability. Success and failure are both important to future success and accurate interpretation is mandatory. Sports teams certainly benefit from successes, but seem to benefit more from careful analysis and understanding of failure. It is not uncommon to hear a coach or manager remarking that “you’ve got to have the bad times to really forge a team mentality” or “you can learn more from a loss than you can from a win.” Often we hear team members taking pride in making it through the “ups and downs,” and “getting through the tough times” is often viewed as a prerequisite for ultimate success. Often individual team members talk about past failures or challenges with pride, almost like a “badge of honor,” pointing to improvement and current team success as the ultimate positive outcome. Some even argue that you must experience failure in order to understand what it takes to succeed. It is likely that individual and team failure (and dealing with the failure appropriately as a group) is a very important determinant of long-term team success. Of course, this discussion is not to discount

the consistent finding that a totally external/environmental attributional expression for failure is highly valued and comfortable to the group. There are frankly many questions that flow from the above discussion. Instead of offering specific research propositions with regard to this typology, we list below a number of tentative questions/propositions ripe for empirical research.

First, “which of the available attributions would lead to the most positive assessment of the individual by group members?” Relatedly, “which attributions lead to the most positive relations within the group?” One could reasonably argue that an attributor would be assessed least favorably when responsibility for success is taken personally or when responsibility for failure is shirked at the expense of fellow group members (Forsyth and Mitchell, 1979). It would seem especially positive for an attributor to speak to the collective, synergistic efforts of the group as the cause for success (internal/collective). It would also seem more favorable to give someone within the group credit for success (group-serving bias) versus calling success lucky or otherwise externally caused. Under conditions of failure, it seems likely that a completely external/environmental attribution is well-received (group-serving bias). It is less clear whether the sharing of blame is, over the long run, more favorably approved than one attributor's taking personal responsibility for failure. It is tentatively proposed that in situations of success, those who make internal/collective attributions (synergistic teamwork) will be most favorably evaluated and endorsed, followed by external/collective (others on the team). It would seem less positive for an individual to offer external/environmental or internal/personal attributions for success. In situations of failure, those who make external/environmental attributions are perhaps most favorably evaluated (group-serving bias), but it might be well-received to offer an internal/collective or internal/personal causal ascription for failure as well. An external/collective failure attribution (blaming the team or members of the team but removing oneself personally from the blame) would seem to be counter-productive to group relations and poorly received by the group, although one might suspect that a long-standing, formal group that has dealt with success and failure many times over the years as a collective, might be able to work through and utilize such an attribution by a team member.

Perhaps more important in formal groups over time would be the questions related to the impact of causal ascription on future performance outcomes and group success. It is tentatively proposed that internal/collective ascriptions for success will not only be well-received by team members and beneficial to team relations, but can also contribute to future success. The latent, synergistic, almost magical success that comes from teamwork is especially motivational and inspiring in many cases. Internal/personal and external/collective attributions might be less well-received by team members, but would seemingly offer much more guidance to the team in terms of understanding the underlying causes for the team's success, which seems to be of great importance to the longer-lived, formal team. An external/environmental attribution seems to offer little guidance to the team in terms of future performance opportunities and would run counter to the group-serving bias.

Under conditions of failure, it is tentatively proposed that while external/environmental causal ascriptions are seemingly comfortable and well-received by the team (and in keeping with the group-serving bias), internal/personal and internal/collective attributions provide excellent information to the group to incorporate into preparation for future performance. An external/collective attribution is often negative in terms of group relations but if accurate and informative, this discussion seems to support its potential benefit to the self-corrective and improvement efforts of the team and the long-term, consistent success by the team.

Level of competition within the group, personalities and influential group members, group norms, reward allocation procedures, culture and prior experiences, future expectations,

characteristics of the particular situation, and other factors will certainly limit and mitigate the generality of the propositions thus far. In addition, group-serving processes as noted above may operate more prevalently in some collectivistic cultures (e.g. Asian and Southern European) or feminine cultures (Northern European) than others. Of particular importance is the fact that groups vary in the degree to which tasks are interdependent and in the level of group cohesiveness. Greater task interdependence and, thus, less person-specific feedback, would result in greater reliance on group identity for enhanced self-esteem. Greater team cohesiveness and identity would seemingly diminish the importance of individual performance relative to team performance. For example, De Cremer (2000) found that group members who have a strong identification or investment in the group tend to attribute success or failure more to the larger group, than to themselves and their contribution.

As noted earlier, Turner (1978) argues that factors that enhance or increase group identification increase the group's role in enhancing the member's self-esteem. When tasks are highly interdependent, the saliency of group identification for purposes of self-esteem enhancement increases (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Zaccaro et al., 1987). This contention serves as further support for the position that internal/collective attributions for group success are highly effective in a total sense. On highly interdependent work tasks and in highly cohesive work groups, it would be expected that internal/personal attributions for group success may be especially dysfunctional due to their resulting derogation of fellow group members or derogation of the entire collectivity.

In addition, many authors have argued that innovative approaches such as work group empowerment, team building, partnering, and quality circles have profound consequences on organizational behavior. The empowerment process itself focuses the attention of team members and supervisory appraisers on the collective efforts of the group. The empowerment process and the nature of the more flexible, team-based organization give individuals relatively fewer opportunities to seek and utilize individual performance appraisals made by superiors. This means that group interpretations of individual performance are the sole or major basis of self-attributions concerning success or failure. **Overall then, it can be proposed that as task interdependence increases, group cohesiveness increases, and person-specific task performance feedback decreases, group members will be more concerned with maintaining interpersonal relationships and identification with the group, therefore they will be less likely to express a self-serving attribution in the traditional sense.** It seems apparent that the kind of environment described in this section is most prevalent in modern organizations and especially in the long-standing, formal group.

This discussion has identified what possibly may be a major strength of working in groups. The group allows the worker an opportunity to maintain interpersonal relationships and social interactions as well as an opportunity to enhance self-esteem. There is relative safety in groups because members are not exposed to the potentially harsh consequences of personal failure. Of course, the extreme glory of individual success is not available, but the opportunity for personal pride and self-esteem enhancement is available through group esteem enhancement. In past attribution research (e.g., Dobbins & Russell, 1986; Miller

& Ross, 1975; Zuckerman, 1979), the importance of enhancing self-esteem through individual, self-serving attributions has been emphasized. It has been suggested here that alternative attributions can be made by the individual to enhance social status as part of one's successful work group. Such an attribution serves the dual purposes of enhancing self-esteem and enhancing the interpersonal relationships that are so important. Most people have likely

witnessed the popularity and inspiration of the internal/collective attribution in many settings, due presumably to its overall utility, effectiveness, and appeal.

Departures from the Rational Model of Information Processing

The discussion thus far has attributed a great deal of rationality to group members. They are characterized as having a strong future orientation, a strong ability to weigh potential choices, a strong ability to pinpoint performance influences, and a strong ability to compute expected utilities. They are shown as being able to process a great deal of information and to provide helpful interpretation to other group members. Their ability to overcome proven human tendencies to bias attributions was also suggested, even though different types of biases were suggested. It seems that other possibilities should at least be considered on how long-standing group situations can alter attribution processes. A limited rationality perspective on attributions is not mutually exclusive of the more rational perspective presented thus far. It seems likely that both perspectives are valid under certain conditions and can operate together. Indeed Harvey and colleagues (2014) argue that causal attributions occur very differently (if at all) depending on the nature of the performance outcome. In many cases, careful and rational analysis can be important but in other cases, no causal interpretation may be necessary or alternatively faster, more efficient cognition might be expedient.

Lord and Smith (1983), Lord and Maher (1990), and Harvey et al. (2014) argue that causality for outcomes may be assessed via a very low level of information processing or even none at all. They suggest that attributions are often guided by cognitive heuristics and simplified knowledge structures that were formed to decrease information processing demands and promote efficiency. Lord and Maher (1990) are somewhat critical of the classical attribution theory models (i.e. Kelley, 1973) that assume that people are able to use large amounts of information in an almost scientific manner to explain causality. Fiske and Taylor (1991) argue that even if humans could process information in this manner, they would not do so due to its inefficiency. Humans, after all, are normally very efficient rather than very thorough in their information processing efforts (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). As Lord and Smith (1983) put it, people attend to and see causality in salient sources. Salient sources may be highly visible, distinctive, or simply processed often and stored centrally in memory (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). **The long-lived group arrangement may very well provide a number of opportunities for this less-careful, less-rational, more efficient causal ascription to occur.**

Gemmill (1989) proposes that the scapegoat role emerges within and among groups to unconsciously allow other members to distance themselves from the anxiety and threat aroused by the cognitive conflict that has been displaced on the scapegoat. The scapegoat becomes salient and readily available in the unconscious of all the group members. Thus, following the logic of Lord and his colleagues, it would seem likely that the scapegoat could quickly be assigned causal blame for many dysfunctional outcomes experienced by the group, even if the scapegoat is not really the problem. With a very limited amount of information processing, group members could easily use the scapegoat as the external/environmental cause of failure in the case of a rival group, a top manager, or a supplier. The use of a group member or sub-group as the scapegoat would constitute an external/collective attribution. But given earlier discussions, it seems that individual workers in formal groups, especially those that are part of long-term groups that have a strong bond and that have defined goals that all members support and those that see the team as a substantive part of who they are, would avoid derogating group members

as much as possible. Groups will likely work together to identify a rival outgroup or some other external source of failure.

All group members are not viewed as equal. Obviously, some members of groups are perceived as more powerful, more intelligent, or more influential than others. In many cases, group members might feel unqualified or unprepared to assign causality to a particular outcome and over time, may look to certain individuals as guiding, sense-makers for the collectivity. It seems likely that some members will become more adept at sense-making and interpretation than others. Group leaders are, in fact, given more responsibility for sense-making than are group members (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). For example, Lazega (1990) has proposed that group members are eager to interact with those who have gained political power in the organization for purposes of clarifying and refining their information. A dominant personality, a charismatic individual, one with access to valuable resources, or an expert might be called upon to assign causality to a particular event. Bannister and Balkin (1990) suggest that individuals have tendencies to seek attributional responses that fit their needs. In fact, much of the literature on feedback (e.g. Alden, 1986; Liden & Mitchell, 1985) suggests that individuals often actively identify and seek those who provide acceptable feedback.

According to Janis (1971, 1972) and Manz and Sims (1982), groupthink may cause a group to unrealistically appraise reality. According to these authors, group members strive for comradery, agreement, and pleasant relationships with lack of rationality becoming the dysfunctional result. Janis (1971, 1972) has suggested that there are a number of symptoms of groupthink that are fairly universal across all cases. Among these are excessive optimism and risk-taking, discounting of negative information, conforming to group judgments, and filtering of information coming in from the environment to fit group needs. Under these circumstances, the group has effectively hampered the ability of group members to rationally and realistically process causal information. Groupthink then, could be an extreme case of the group processes characterized in the earlier portion of this article.

Conclusions and Implications to Research and Practice

This article has discussed the potential for remarkable rationality and a strong sense of how causal attribution can inform and guide future performance. On the other hand, the article closed suggesting the strong likelihood of limited or bounded rationality. Many contextual factors will be important in determining actual group cognition and behavior. Such factors include the importance of the performance outcome, the importance of efficiency versus thoroughness in information processing, the degree to which the performance was mundane or casual, the implications of the performance to future performance, the implications of the performance to group rewards, the implications of the performance outcome to harmony and group relationships, and the degree to which the attribution has implications to group and self-esteem.

Attributions are an important linkage in the complex relationship between performance outcomes, cognitive and affective reactions, intentions for the future, and subsequent behaviors. The main contribution of this paper to practice is the realization that, when dealing with long-standing, interdependent, formal groups, some of the well-researched implications of causal attribution may not stand. Of particular importance to the practice of management, given this discussion, is structuring of performance feedback, allocation of rewards, and structuring of long-term work teams. One can see that bolstering personal self-esteem is likely not the individual team member's primary motive in making attributions. In the long-standing, formal

group setting, individuals may benefit from failure and the learning that comes with “trying to improve together.”

With the typology presented in this article, it is suggested that more alternatives exist beyond just traditional internal and external attributions. For example, if failure is attributed to an external/collective cause (e.g. a sub-group not including the attributor), the attributor could be encouraged to help the sub-group on future occasions. Also, the internal/collective attribution allows group members to take more risks, to attempt more innovation and creativity without the fear of ego exposure. It is also clear that individuals who exhibit learned helpless tendencies (Martinko & Gardner, 1982) can be aided by inclusion in an optimistic work group. Key individuals also can “set the collective tone” of attributions made for group outcomes, which can be healthful rather than negative. Eberly and co-workers (2011) presented an important view of attributions made with regard to the relationships among people. For example, failure or sub-optimal performance can be ascribed to a poor relationship with another key player.

The case for team building and other efforts toward enhancing team cohesiveness is also suggested. Self-esteem is enhanced or protected both through self-serving attributions and group-serving attributions. Individuals might be encouraged to take greater responsibility, attempt rather risky endeavors and learn new skills if work is arranged such that self-esteem can be maintained or enhanced through group membership rather than through individual feedback.

This article points out dangers also. The best feedback and reward systems can be mitigated by the heuristic and limited processing models of attribution. The implication of the limited processing perspective is that managers can actually lose control of work group performance due to misguided attributions and information processing. Through group interaction, the individual may arrive at a causal ascription totally unexpected by the manager.

Others are encouraged to explore this avenue, for many questions persist at the present time about how these long-standing, formal groups differ in information processing from individuals and from more casual, less interdependent groups. It is hoped that these ideas will be refined for purposes of empirical testing. With the prevalence of group-based management in modern organizations, researchers should feel compelled to move with haste toward better understanding.

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Influence of Long-Standing Formal Groups on Attribution Formation and Expression

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Abstract

In modern organizations, groups and teams cooperate, interact, and work very closely together over an extended period. With these long-standing formal groups, individual members become inextricably bound to the other members, processes, and outcomes experienced by the group. This article explores our current understandings of attributions and interpretive interactions of the formal group and proposes refinement due to group dynamics, behavior, and cognition associated with long-lived groups. While group attribution research is extensive, causal ascriptions and sense-making efforts in these groups are likely quite different when compared to that of more casual, shorter-lived groups. Two perspectives are utilized to illustrate these variations. The first perspective deals with members' dual concerns of ego protection and enhancement versus group interdependence, harmony, and productivity/performance. A typology of attributions and interpretations that are formed and shared within groups is proposed and implications are discussed. The second perspective pertains to the possibility of departure from rational information processing which has dominated existing attribution literature. A number of heuristic and limited processing attributions are suggested and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Attributions, Groups, Teams, Self-Serving Bias, Group-Serving Bias, Limited Rationality, Heuristics

French abstract*

Influence of Long-Standing Formal Groups on Attribution
Formation and Expression

Influence de groupes formels de longue durée sur la formation d'attribution et l'expression

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Résumé

Dans les organisations modernes, des groupes et équipes collaborent, interagissent et travaillent très étroitement ensemble sur une longue période. Avec ces groupes formels, formés de longue date, les membres individuels sont inextricablement liés aux autres membres, aux processus et aux résultats rencontrés par le groupe. Cet article explore nos connaissances actuelles en matière d'attributions et interactions interprétatives d'un groupe formel et propose une amélioration qui tient compte de la dynamique de groupe, du comportement et de la cognition qui sont associés à des groupes formés de longue durée. Bien que la recherche d'attribution de groupe est vaste, des ascriptions causales et les efforts de *sensmaking* dans ces groupes formels et formés depuis longtemps sont probablement différents par rapport à ceux des groupes plus décontractés, formés de plus courte durée. Deux points de vue sont utilisés pour illustrer ces variations. La première perspective traite d'une préoccupation des membres d'un groupe concernant la protection et l'amélioration de leur ego par rapport à l'interdépendance du groupe, à l'harmonie et à sa performance. Une typologie d'attributions et d'interprétations, qui sont partagées au sein d'un groupe, est proposée et les implications sont discutées. La deuxième perspective concerne le traitement rationnel d'informations, qui domine la littérature existante. Un certain nombre d'attributions de rationalité limitée et heuristique est suggéré et les implications sont discutées.

Mots-clés: Attributions, groupes, équipes, bias service à soi-même, bias service au groupe, rationalité limitée, heuristique

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German abstract*

Influence of Long-Standing Formal Groups on Attribution
Formation and Expression

Der Einfluss von lange bestehenden formalen Gruppen auf die Attribution

Entstehung und Ausprägung

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Zusammenfassung

In modernen Organisationen kooperieren Gruppen und Teams, sie interagieren und arbeiten über einen längeren Zeitraum hinweg eng zusammen. Durch diese lange bestehenden formalen Gruppen werden die einzelnen Mitglieder untrennbar verbunden mit den anderen Mitgliedern, den Prozessen und Ergebnissen, die die Gruppe erlebt. Dieser Artikel untersucht unser derzeitiges Verständnis von Attribution und interpretativer Interaktion der formalen Gruppe und macht Vorschläge zur Verfeinerung aufgrund von Gruppendynamiken, Verhaltensweisen und Kognition die mit lange bestehenden Gruppen in Verbindung gebracht werden. Obwohl die Forschung zu Gruppenattribution umfangreich ist, sind zwanglose Zuschreibungen und sinnvolle Bemühungen in diesen Gruppen im Vergleich zu ungezwungenen, kurzlebigeren Gruppen vermutlich sehr verschieden. Um diese Variationen zu verdeutlichen werden zwei Perspektiven genutzt. Die erste Perspektive befasst sich mit dem dualen Interesse der Gruppenmitglieder an Selbstschutz und Verbesserung gegenüber Gruppeninterdependenzen, Harmonie und Produktivität/Performance. Es wird eine Typologie der innerhalb von Gruppen entstehenden und geteilten Attribution und Interpretationen vorgeschlagen und ihre Auswirkungen diskutiert. Die zweite Perspektive betrifft die Möglichkeit der Abweichung von rationaler Informationsverarbeitung welche die bisher existierende Literatur der Attribution dominiert hat. Eine Reihe von heuristischen und eingeschränkt verarbeitenden Attribution wird vorgeschlagen und ihre Auswirkungen diskutiert.

Keywords: Attribution; Gruppen; Teams; Selbstwertdienliche Verzerrung; Group-serving Bias; begrenzte Rationalität; Heuristik

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Spanish abstract*

Influence of Long-Standing Formal Groups on Attribution
Formation and Expression

Influencia de los Grupos Formales de Larga Duración en la Atribución La Formación y la Expresión

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Resumen

En las organizaciones modernas, grupos y equipos cooperan, interactúan y trabajan muy estrechamente durante un período prolongado. Con estos grupos formales de larga duración, los miembros individuales se vuelven inseparablemente unidos a los otros miembros, los procesos y los resultados experimentados por el grupo. Este artículo explora nuestros conocimientos actuales de las atribuciones y las interacciones de interpretación del grupo formal, y propone el refinamiento que se produce por la dinámica de grupo, el comportamiento y la cognición asociados con grupos de larga duración. Si bien la investigación sobre la atribución del grupo es extensa, las adscripciones causales y los esfuerzos del sentido de las decisiones en estos grupos probablemente es muy diferente en comparación con la de los grupos más informales, de vida más corta. Dos puntos de vista se utilizan para ilustrar estas variaciones. La primera perspectiva se ocupa de la preocupación de la protección del ego y la mejora frente a la interdependencia del grupo, la armonía y la productividad/rendimiento de los miembros. Se propone una tipología de las atribuciones y las interpretaciones que se forman y se comparten dentro de los grupos y se discuten las implicaciones. El segundo punto de vista se refiere a la posibilidad de la ausencia de procesamiento de la información racional que ha dominado la literatura existente sobre atribución. Se sugieren una serie de atribuciones de procesamiento heurístico y limitadas, y se discuten las implicaciones.

Palabras Clave: Atribuciones, grupos, equipos, sesgos egoístas, sesgos de grupo, racionalidad limitada, heurísticos

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Arabic abstract*

Influence of Long-Standing Formal Groups on Attribution Formation and Expression

تأثير المجموعات الرسمية الطويلة البقاء على المساهمة

التشكيل والتقديم

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الملخص

تتفاعل الجماعات والفرق وتعمل بشكل جماعي في المنظمات الحديثة على مدى فترة زمنية ممتدة. مع هذه المجموعات الرسمية الطويلة البقاء، يصبح الافراد مرتبطين بالأعضاء الأخرى، والعمليات، والنتائج التي يمر بها الفريق. يكشف هذا المقال مفاهيمنا الحالية للصفات والتفاعلات التفسيرية للمجموعات الرسمية ويقترح التحسين من حركة المجموعة، والسلوك، والإدراك المرتبطة بجماعات معمرة. بما ان بحث مجموعة الوصف واسع النطاق، فالسببية وجهود صنع المعنى في هذه المجموعات على الأرجح مختلفة تماما مقارنة مع تلك الأكثر سببية والجماعات الأقصر عمرا. وهناك منظورين لتوضيح هذه الاختلافات. يتناول المنظور الأول اهتمامات الأعضاء المزدوجة لحماية وتعزيز الأنا مقابل مجموعة الترابط والانسجام والإنتاجية / الأداء. ويقترح تصنيف للصفات والتفسيرات التي يتم تشكيلها والمشاركة داخل المجموعات وتناقش الآثار المترتبة عليها. اما المنظور الثاني فيتعلق بإمكانية ترك معالجة المعلومات العقلاني الذي هيمن على السمات الأدبية الحالية. واقترح عدد من صفات تجهيز الكشف عن مجريات الأمور المحدودة وتم مناقشة الآثار المترتبة عليها.

الكلمات الدالة: سمات, مجموعات, الانحياز للخدمة الذاتية, الانحياز للعمل الجماعي, المنطقية الاستدلال.

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Chinese abstract*

Influence of Long-Standing Formal Groups on Attribution
Formation and Expression

长期正式组对归因的影响
形成和表达

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摘要

在现代组织中，小组和团队合作，互动，并在较长时间内非常密切地合作。在这些长期的正式组中，个人会员变得和其他成员息息相关，并将自己融入小组的进程和结果。本文探讨了目前对长期正式组的归因和相互作用的理解，并基于群体动态，行为和认知提出了细化。虽然集团归因的研究很广泛，和短期随意的组相比，长期正式组的因果归因，意义构建很可能完全不同。本文应用两种观点来说明这些变化。第一个角度涉及小组成员对自我保护和加强，以及对集团的相互依存，和谐，效率/性能的双重担忧。本文提出了一个在组内形成和分享的归因和诠释的类型并对其应用进行了讨论。第二个观点探讨了从主宰已有归因研究文献的理性信息处理分离的可能性。本文提出了有关启发和有限的加工归因的建议并对其影响进行了讨论。

关键：归因，小组，团队，自我服务偏见，团体服务偏见，有限理性，启发式]

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