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Tripartite's Fourth Part: The Role of Faith in Attribution Theory

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Abstract

This paper posits the need for a fourth component in the tripartite model of attitude. Attributions by spiritual persons differ from those of individualists and collectivists in that attributions of blame are dismissed (using forgiveness), and attributions of self-credit are ignored (credited instead to God). Arguments include the need to consider transcendence, the evolution of attitudinal models, unique concepts, cultural impact, and nonsecular attribution. Spirituality's framework allows attributions to something other than people and situations, and attribution error avoidance using forgiveness and glory. Benefits include a fuller view of attitude, and applications to aid grief and family connectedness. Supported by previous developing research on attitude, the paper suggests adding a spiritual dimension to the existing affective, cognitive, and behavioral components.

Tripartite's Fourth Part: The Role of Faith in Attribution Theory

Social psychology's attribution theory holds that we as individuals typically blame situational factors for our negative outcomes and dispositional factors for positive ones. Such attributions are representative of both individualist and collectivist cultures, although collectivists tend to include more situational elements when attributing outcomes (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2010). This theory, however, may omit an underlying fourth component of the tripartite attitude model. The typical tripartite model suggests three components of attitude (affective, cognitive, and behavioral), representative of the secular view of the universe ("Attitudes," 2004). Internalized and externalized spirituality, however, often transcend secular explanations of both situational and dispositional behaviors. The tripartite model may benefit from the addition of a fourth component—faith—to help the secular mind understand this transcendency. This faith component provides for an attitude that is neither individualist nor collectivist in nature. Though faith may itself be attributed to emotion, cognition, or behavior, faith need not be felt (nor thought, nor demonstrated) to exist for any individual ("Faith," 2011; Hebrews 11:1 King James Version). Its evidence is solely a difference in hope between those who hold it and those who do not.

Several world religions attribute their longevity and widespread adoption to this concept called faith. Though often described as nonmeasurable and unobservable, faith may certainly be measured and observed by its effects the way Chomsky (in Rieber, 2010) described the unobservable process whereby light emission by fusion occurs in the sun. In this regard, faith is a form of attitude, by which the faithful ascribe attributions for positive and negative outcomes to something greater than either the self or the collective. The following arguments posit that substantiation for a fourth attributional component for faith (spiritual) is objectively possible.

These arguments will show that attributions within a spiritual mindset differ from those of individualists and collectivists in that attributions of blame are dismissed (using the concept of forgiveness), and attributions of self-credit are ignored (and credited instead to God whose grace provides those positive outcomes).

Arguments for Model Revision

Social psychology is evolving to embrace new constructs and new areas of exploration, because each new explanation often engenders new questions in new areas of thought. Just as social psychology recognizes that understanding the self within self (the component parts of what we are) is possible by understanding the self within a functioning social unit, so too attribution theory may benefit from encompassing all possible aspects of self. The following arguments demonstrate these missing aspects, and why current models of attitude and attribution would benefit from inclusion of factors unique to spiritual minds, to better and more fully comprehend human attribution in all its variety and complexity.

Transcendancy

Contemporary models incorporate known concepts, such as individualism and collectivism, to discern the attribution process (see Aronson et al., 2010; Krull et al., 1999). These models though, do not include transcendent mindsets that attribute causality to an entity that is neither human nor natural. Such inclusion is not intended to infer hypothetical truth of deities and spirituality, solely that inclusion is important if we are to understand all possible forms of behavioral attribution.

Evolving Models

A second argument favoring model revision is the evidence that models have changed in the evolution of social psychology. According to Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick (1985),

attribution theory began with two understood goals of making attributions: (a) to understand in order to obtain meaning, and (b) to predict in order to control one's environment. Subsequent study added a third goal, (c) to maintain or enhance esteem. This new component arose in part because related studies showed esteem to occupy a role of goal-fulfillment. Modern attribution theory represents a revision of these earlier goal components, termed the tripartite model (affective, cognitive, and behavioral). This model is affirmed in empirical studies like those of Breckler (1984), supporting the existence of these multiple components as underlying concepts both biologically and psychologically.

Distinguishing Explanations

Hunsberger (1991) lays down a framework for the psychology of religion, suggesting that a spiritual mindset is distinguishable from a secular one. His work advocates applying social psychological principles like social cognition and attribution theory to religion particularly. Saraglou (2011) offers an intriguing generalized set of dimensions (the *big four*) for understanding cognitive processes underlying most any spiritual framework. His *logical op codes* combining these four (believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging) in interesting ways differs substantially from existing secular descriptions, and offers a unified explanation of the significant disparity in spiritual attitudes and behaviors. For example, by combining the fundamental dimensions of *believing and bonding*, various manifestations of spirituality surface. The combination of *believing and behaving*, similarly, helps describe intrinsic religion. Various other combinations of these *big four* can be merged into pairs such as: orthodoxy, asceticism, charismatic expression, and moral emphasis. Saraglou (2011) additionally explains how religion crosses personal/social boundaries because it typically becomes ordered so that it can be shared (allowing individuals to *belong*). This also permits such a framework to exist cross-culturally as

a result (individualistic and collectivistic), possibly because of this shared goal of self-growth (and well-being) together with social-growth (and well-being).

Unique Origins

Salancik and Conway (1975) present a brilliant extension of Bem's counterintuitive attribution theory, by exploring the fundamental basis of *original predisposition*, a uniquely spiritual concept that allows the *origin paradox* to be included in attribution theory (the origins of first dispositions). This concept studies how we formulate *original predisposition*—is it fully internalized (original belief and schema from elements) or a merging of extrinsic schemas and attitudes that we come to believe are intrinsic and fundamental (i.e. what is fundamental in the absence of a beginning—what is the *first stone*).

Bidirectional Cultural Impact

Nearly concurrent with work on this paper is a newly published article by Saraglou and Cohen (2011). The authors present effective arguments for beginning research into the sometimes intimate and substantial interrelation between religion and culture. These arguments include how religion often helps to define culture, society, prevalent attitudes, and beliefs in outcomes. If, as the authors posit, these two are entangled and interwoven as deeply as they seem, to study attribution of the one without inclusion of the other is to omit much of the framework by which society understands the world. Cognition, emotion, behavior, and self-concept shape and are shaped by culture, and culture in turn is shaped to large degree by its religious roots. Additionally, cultural norms under the influence of religion affect the way persons view prejudice, sense of control, and well-being. Without a spiritual component then, it can be argued that the attitudes various cultures possess cannot be fully understood or studied.

Fundamental Attribution Accuracy

Typically, attribution theory is underlined by a ubiquitous problem, the fundamental attribution error. This error is a result of the difficulty in discerning causes combined with the need to preserve self-image and beliefs (Aronson et al., 2010). Additionally, attribution error is often the result of lack of information about the event and its causality. Paradoxically, the purpose of attribution theory should be one of accuracy. The addition of a spiritual component then may provide the inclusion of elements needed to more accurately attribute causality—without which attributional error (from a spiritual standpoint) might result. However, understanding this correlation to substantiate that inclusion would be aided considerably by mentioning the work of Spilka et al. (1985) on this very subject—attribution theory and religion.

The authors deconstruct the scene and the actors of events into some basic elements. Attributions stem from an attributor and his or her context, and an event with its context. The first need is to infer causality (and choose between possible causes, human or otherwise). If that causality involves a human actor, we further presume persistent traits and intent. The second need is to control outcomes, and that control is best if we can identify a predictable, ordered system and some means to affect it (to assure positive outcomes and avoid negative ones). Third, attribution begins because: (a) the event elicits inner dissonance when trying to incorporate it with existing knowledge, (b) the event might affect our sense of control, or (c) the event presents a danger to our image of self. The fourth need arises because of the need to resolve the third—in resolving dissonance, restoring confidence, and assuring esteem. The remaining element is less a need than an explanation; religion affords us a new resource for enhanced meaning. It provides more choices for possible explanation, a comprehensive prebuilt framework, satisfies the need

for control (God has control, and we can somehow affect God on our behalf), and it provides an avenue for growing esteem.

Spilka et al. (1985) posit that human beings already incorporate spiritual elements within attributions using the above. Therefore, to understand attribution in the widest sense, an argument can be offered for the inclusion of a spiritual component to fully ascertain potential explanations of such attributions. In particular, the authors argue that religion represents a system of meaning already used for (and by implication capable of) interpreting and attributing causality. Nature is also a factor in events, and without some sentiency attached to unexplainable natural events, human beings will infer such sentiency to help preserve the above needs (consonance of thought, confidence in outcomes, and preservation of esteem).

A Spiritual Attribution Framework

Having substantiated the need to represent an additional, unique attribution mindset to the existing model, an elaboration of that mindset is warranted. Four dimensions aid in explaining the uniqueness of the spiritual mindset: (a) attributions to something other than people and situations, (b) how such attributions are made, (c) factors contributing to the type of attribution, and (d) how forgiveness and glory replace the secular fundamental attribution error. Though the possibility of a third possible cause is itself unique, most unique of all is this tendency for spiritual minds to avoid the self-serving bias using the distinctive concepts of forgiveness and glory. Explanations of these spiritual framework dimensions follow.

The Third Bias (God)

The secular world is aware of and includes dispositional and situational biases, because the secular world acknowledges only man and nature. Events containing unknowns require making attributions based on one of these two. The spiritual mind acknowledges a third possible

bias—a sentient God possessing intent and the ability to affect outcomes. Regardless of the resulting attribution, this sentient third choice (God) replaces the unknown and allows the attributor to maintain a sense of control over outcomes (Spilka et al., 1985). The secular model, lacking this explanation, forms the self-serving bias instead—to explain outcomes while maintaining esteem and a sense of control (Aronson et al., 2010).

How God is Involved

Gorsuch and Smith (1983) explain that religious individuals primarily form attributions involving God with extreme outcomes (usually positive ones). This is dependent on various nearness indicators (how *near* to God the attributor's self concept is), and how explainable an outcome is in naturalistic terms (the degree of improbability in the Sherlockian sense, sometimes termed *God of the gaps* theory). Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, and Aarts (2008) add the contextual priming element: they suggest that ascription of authorship may depend on relevance to contextual factors. Their study found that participants ascribed authorship (responsibility) to secular causes when subliminal priming does not include thoughts about God. However, when primed with religious thoughts, attributions favored involvement and responsibility of this additional possibility. God's involvement then, within attribution, is affected by the spiritual thinking of the attributor.

When God is Involved

Spiritually minded persons include unique factors to determine the attributed involvement of God. Galen and Miller (2011) contribute the *deservingness* element. Within spiritual mindsets, deservingness of outcome sometimes blames individuals in the vein of *blaming the victim* when that bias is especially made by a fundamentalist view. This factor alone potentially warrants attributional study, because paradoxically those who are more religiously fundamental tend to be

less compassionate of victims difficult to identify with, even when the cause is evidentially not dispositional. Perhaps more unique is that deservingness in the spiritual mind often uses different measures for self and others; self (depending on primary faith and denominational interpretation) may need conditions to achieve deservingness, whereas others typically need not be deserving (only needful) when being considered for prosocial aid. This too differs from secular theories like social exchange theory.

Norenzayan and Lee (2010) introduce entire subfields of spiritual attribution study: concerning Fate and equifinality, the distinguishing of the many views of Fate, and how anthropomorphism changes the attributor's view of agency in attributing causality. Finally, religiosity can be subdivided into three components itself (intrinsically religious, extrinsically religious, and quest-based), further complicating the study of attributions due to the disparity of goals and world concept (Herek, 1987).

The Forgiveness Factor

Forgiveness in the secular sense, like social exchange theory, is a quid pro quo system dependent on the relationship (Balliet, Li, & Joireman, 2011). Attitude toward the offender (or group) depends largely on attributions of the potential contrition possible (Wohl, Hornsey & Bennett, 2011). Secular forgiveness is easier between individuals sharing the same in-group for example, but disparate groups suffer from effects like inhumanization (out-group members are viewed as less human). Forgiveness in the spiritual sense according to Schultz, Tallman, and Altmaier (2010), can be unidimensional (the noncontingent grace-forgiveness model mostly attributed to God alone), or multidimensional (distinguishable from reconciliation, forgetting, and condoning). The grace-forgiveness form may be seen as an ideal, just as the *Lord's Prayer* emphasizes the releasing of debts owed us in daily remembrance (Matthew 6:9-15). Human

frailty, the need for trust and safety, and the inability to dismiss episodic memory entirely make such an ideal difficult. Perhaps this point is most poignant in the verse “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8 King James Version), where we see *both* cognition and behavior differentiated. Schultz and colleagues (2010) do explore the concept of reconciliation and its benefit to posttraumatic growth, introducing intriguing directions of study for altered purpose and altered self-concept within spiritual thinking. Their work suggests that forgetting is not possible because, although semantic memory is rewritten partially, episodic memory persists—inhibiting reestablishment of interpersonal trust.

The Glory Factor

Secularly, the absence of a deity in forming attributions leaves two possible entities: others (i.e. the situation), and self. Maintaining the self-concept requires frequent use of the self-serving bias, by attributing negative outcomes to situations or others, and positive ones to self. Attributions to self naturally involve self-glory or self-credit. The spiritual mindset, through teachings, tenets, and spiritual goals, attempts to attribute credit to God for positive outcomes to maintain a spirit of humility and thankfulness. This spiritual attribution of credit is not easy to understand using secular components of psychological attribution, as is evidenced in Spilka et al. (1985). This evidence shows that, paradoxically, spiritual attributions to an external deity stemming from undeservingness (seen secularly) are seen as a self-drive to boost esteem—because the positive result must be due to God’s special favoring of that intrinsically faithful individual. This allows the fundamental attribution error to fit within a misunderstood process, and prominently evidences a unique reason why we should incorporate a spiritual component (objectively but inclusively) into attribution theory.

Moreover, the faithful are in part driven by adoration, and this adoration evinces itself in glory attributions for nearly everything welcome yet unexplainable. As Wrigley-Carr (2008) explains in her work on von Hügel, adoration itself encompasses the tripartite attitude we seek to understand—head, heart, and hands (in social psychology: cognition, affectation, and behavior). Faith, then, is the substance of attitude that envelops these three (“the evidence of things not seen,” Hebrews 11:1 King James Version).

Benefits of a Spiritual Component

The arguments supporting inclusion of a spiritual component in attribution theory, and a description of the framework of such a component, would not be complete without the presentation of arguments toward applied research. Discernment of subjacent processes, as Chomsky mentioned in the Rieber (2010) interview, is also possible by indirectly observing results of those hidden processes. Work by Balliet et al. (2011) studied evidence of positive correlations between acts of forgiveness and subsequent prosocial self. The study's results suggest this benefit is not even dependent on a spiritual, prosocial mindset. Forgiveness transcends the self-serving bias by allowing the benefit of growth using tenets of social exchange theory as well. Basically, the study proves that prosocial-orientations can lead to forgiveness even with little concern for others. Time mitigates reluctance factors because the prosocial wants immediate satisfaction and views forgiveness as a benefit toward that in the short term.

Complementing posttraumatic studies and restorative theories, Exline, Park, Smyth, and Carey (2011) present many examples of attributions suggesting that God is responsible for severely negative outcomes. When in self-relevant attribution the individual somehow blames God for undeserved outcomes to self, the full dimension of forgiveness is misunderstood, by including God in attribution but omitting God in the scope of understanding and forgiveness. In

some this evidences much like longitudinally held anger toward others—as anger toward God that cannot find relief. Yet Exline et al. (2011) also note that this response correlates negatively with spiritual nearness, wherein anger and blame within self-bias are diffused by the comfort that this tender attachment between self and deity remains warm, close, and unbroken. This externally directed emotion surfaces in both atheists and religious individuals. The addition of a spiritual component—particularly with the inclusion of explanatory frameworks—might allow internal reconciliation with stages of grief proportional to the comforting proximity with one's adoring, forgiving, intrinsic faith.

Finally, Sabatier, Mayer, Friedlmeier, Lubiewska, and Trommsdorff (2011) conducted a study across multiple regions to correlate religion with life satisfaction. The study holds promise that religion correlates positively (and proportionally) to the depth of religious participation and thought. The conclusion posits that religion helps predispose positivity during renegotiation of values in adolescence which strengthens familial bonds. This resolution of emerging identity leads to the well-being inherent in individual meaningfulness, family connectedness, and a consonant identity.

Conclusion

Attribution theory may be omitting an underlying fourth component of the tripartite attitude model. The typical tripartite model suggests three components of attitude (affective, cognitive, and behavioral), representative of the secular view of the universe. Internalized and externalized spirituality, however, often transcend secular explanations of both situational and dispositional behaviors. The tripartite model may benefit from the addition of a fourth component—faith—to help the secular mind understand this transcendence. This spiritual component provides for an attitude that is neither individualist nor collectivist in nature. Though

faith may itself be attributed to emotion, cognition, or behavior, faith need not be felt (nor thought, nor demonstrated) to exist for any individual. Its evidence is solely a difference in hope between those who hold it and those who do not.

Arguments for the inclusion of a spiritual component include the following. Social psychology is evolving to embrace new constructs, and has a history of revising existing models to better represent new discoveries. Current models however, do not yet include unique spiritual factors like transcendency, religious cognition, mixable dimensions (believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging to a greater power), or original predisposition. Several prominent social psychologists are exploring new avenues that incorporate (or suggest a need for inclusion of) a spiritual component to extend the field's understanding, and new arguments suggest the entangled nature of culture, religion, and disposition toward that end. One of the salient missing factors in current attribution theory is the ability to infer sentiency on the unexplainable, and its need in affirming personal control of outcomes. Spilka et al. (1985) posit that we frequently incorporate spiritual elements within attributions already, so to understand attribution in the widest sense, a spiritual component is essential to fully ascertain potential explanations of such attributions.

A framework for the spiritual component may include four dimensions as an aid in explaining the uniqueness of the spiritual mindset. One, attributions may include a third possible bias other than people and situations (God), to help explain the unknown and maintain a sense of control over outcomes. Two, how such attributions are made includes inner determination of nearness to God and the ability (or not) to explain by natural means. Three, factors contributing to the type of attribution include uniquely spiritual dimensions, for example deservingness, intrinsic belief, and extrinsic belief. Four, forgiveness and glory replace the secular fundamental

attribution error, resulting in potential avoidance of the self-serving bias—two concepts easily misunderstood without inclusion of a spiritual component.

Forgiveness—attributing blame to no one—is difficult to understand in a secular sense, but in the spiritual one the striving for the ideal encompasses the potential to forgive unidimensionally, with full reconciliation and with the expunging of episodic memory of all wrongdoing. Glory—attributing God with positive outcomes—is only understood in the context of spiritual concepts like undeservingness, and loving adoration (whose very expression encompasses the tripartite attitude we seek to understand). Lastly, the addition of a spiritual component to the tripartite model offers benefits for applied research. Benefits from forgiveness for the prosocial self, and benefits from forgiveness in posttraumatic recovery can aid counselors by providing an attitudinal tool that studies have shown is helpful. Benefits in grief reconciliation upon understanding the psychological component of spiritual attribution can give the grief-stricken the strength and peace to *forgive* God. Benefits for adolescents and families in restoring positivity and connectedness can realize growth for both science and society.

The preceding arguments support the substantiation of a fourth attributional component (spiritual). These arguments show that attributions within a spiritual mindset differ from those of individualists and collectivists in that attributions of blame are dismissed (using the concept of forgiveness), and attributions of self-credit are ignored (and credited instead in adoration of God whose grace provides those positive outcomes).

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