ATTRIBUTION, COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR, AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

The field of close relationships is one of the most fertile areas of work in the social and behavioral sciences. Central to theoretical developments in the study of close relationships is a focus on people's interpretive activities and communication behavior. Theories of attribution and of communication styles are prominent in contemporary explanations of why and how people begin close relationships, maintain and enhance closeness, and sometimes terminate close relationships. This volume brings together leading scholars to explain how attribution and communication behavior can help us to understand the nature of close relationships. As a comprehensive and up-to-date reference, *Attribution, Communication Behavior, and Close Relationships* will appeal to scholars in communication studies, family studies, human development, social and clinical psychology, family socialogy, and social work.

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Attribution, Communication Behavior, and Close Relationships

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This book is dedicated to pioneering scholars of communication behavior and of attribution processes, especially Harold Kelley and the late Neil Jacobson, whose collective work contributed greatly to the development of the interface between attribution and communication behavior in close relationships.

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Introduction

Valerie Manusov

Our close relationships provide the context for many of our most important – and most mundane – experiences. Because personal relationships are where so much that we value happens, understanding the nature and processes of close relationships is critical. This book is meant to aid in the journey to learn more about what occurs in and around personal relationships. In particular, it focuses on two processes – attributions and communication. In some chapters, the two are discussed as separately occurring activities; in other chapters, the link is much closer. Indeed, looking over the ways that these chapters envision attributions and communication behavior in close relationships enhances our understanding of what the processes entail.

Some of the authors in the current volume conceptualize attributions as the explanations that are given for social actions, including communication behaviors. This perspective on the attribution – communication link identifies attributions as a general form of sense making, which is likely to occur when the cause or origin of behaviors needs to be identified. For example, in her chapter Anita Vangelisti describes attributions as "explanations for why [people's] emotions are evoked." Attributions, for these authors, are people's *verbal descriptions* of why a communicative event occurred. This conceptualization of attribution as explanation for communication (or other) behaviors reveals attributions as social creations used by people to help them understand and describe their own or others' actions. They are utterances elicited by researchers, but also presumably used in everyday life, that provide descriptions of people's answers to "why" questions.

This perspective on attributions equates to some researchers' view of accounts, and indeed, Jeanne Flora and Chris Segrin discuss attributions as *accounts* for relational development. Likewise, David Atkins,

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Sona Dimidjian, and Neil Jacobson, in seeking research on people's explanations for extramarital involvement, label the attributions they found as *justifications,* a common form of account. Also, Cathy Surra and Denise Bartell captured causal explanations in the reasons (accounts) people gave for their commitment to their relationships. The authors who analyze attributions as communicated accounts provide a function for attributions not usually discussed when attributions are seen as a private form of sense making (but see Sandra Metts' commentary for some caution about using this approach).

Other authors conceptualize attributions as tied specifically to cause and/or responsibility and use rating scales to assess the structure of the attributions; this rating approach is more consistent with traditional attribution work. These authors differ, however, in the degree to which they rely on previously identified attribution dimensions. Ellen Berscheid, Jason Lopes, Hilary Ammazzalorso, and Nora Langenfeld, for example, provide an analysis that rests firmly in – while simultaneously extending – Kelley's discussion of personal and environmental causes. Steven Wilson and Ellen Whipple use four attribution dimensions, namely, locus, generality (similar to stability), blame, and knowledge. The knowledge attribution was an extension of previous research made relevant by the object of the attributions, children's misbehavior. Likewise, Daphne Bugental, William Shennum, Mark Frank, and Paul Ekman, through the Picture Attribution Test, determined the extent to which the children they were studying or someone else (actor versus other) was the primary causal agent.

These authors show that traditional attribution dimensions may need to be expanded according to the type of relationship and the nature of the behavior that are under investigation. Indeed, Candida Peterson, Ashlea Troth, Cynthia Gallois, and Judith Feeney use a set of attribution dimensions unique to their interest in assessments of communication difficulty. They look at the extent to which people perceived their own and their partner's motivations and conversational strategies during the interaction task as having friendly or hostile intent, being open or closed communication, revealing topic avoidance or involvement, reflecting a competitive or cooperative orientation, and reflecting a calm or emotional mood.

Others, such as Valerian Derlega and Barbara Winstead, use their data to establish potential new categories of attributions. These authors found a large variety of reasons (e.g., similarity of background or privacy concerns) that people offer as attributions for why they did

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or did not disclose their human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) status to others. Similarly, Patricia Noller, Judith Feeney, and Anita Blakeley-Smith provide both responsibility and causal attributions that reveal the types of explanations people give for changes in their relationship. These include such causes of change as having children, maturity, time together, and alterations in the needs of the couple members. In general, the authors who focus on attribution structure in this book do so in a way that broadens what the term structure or nature has meant in past research. They help show that the nature of the relationship in which the attributions are made and the topic of the research study affect the types of attribution dimensions that are likely to be relevant. However, in his commentary Frank Fincham has pointed out some caveats about exploring too may dimensions of attributions.

Several authors in this volume reveal an even closer link between attributions and communication. Valerie Manusov and Jody Koenig, for instance, look at the attributions couples provide for nonverbal interaction behaviors as the meanings that they have ascribed to the communication cues. Thus, unlike the previous groups of authors, who presume that communication behaviors, such as hurtful messages, changes in relationships, or choosing not to communicate, need attributions to make sense of the message itself, these authors operationalize the attribution *as* the message. Alan Sillars, Linda Roberts, Tim Dun, and Kenneth Leonard also focus on attributions as communication. In their extensive coding of real-time interactions, Sillars et al. accessed the attributions people gave to what they are their partners were likely thinking at the time of the interaction. Individual members of couples stated what they thought they and their partner were attempting to communicate or what was probably going on in their minds as they interacted; thus, the attributions reflected the couples' assessments of the meanings for the communication behaviors in which they or their partner engaged.

The variety of possible ways presented by the authors to investigate the ties between attributions and communication in close relationships provides an important benefit of the current volume. In general, the chapters reveal at least three ways of thinking about this link. First, attributions are seen as a form of communication that involves explanations for behaviors or events. Second, attributions are seen as necessary *for* communication cues (i.e., causal or other explanations are given for why someone communicated what or how he or she did). Third, attributions may be seen as an important part of

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the communicated message itself, with causal explanations becoming the meaning ascribed to or communicated by behaviors.

In addition to conceiving the attribution–communication link in multiple and interesting ways, several other chapter authors attempt to expand our understanding of how attribution or communication processes work. Matthew Johnson, Benjamin Karney, Ronald Rogge, and Thomas Bradbury, for instance, review an organized line of research that seeks to determine whether attributions vary as a function of other cognitions, such as marital satisfaction, or vice versa. They determine, and make a compelling case, that attribution making tends to precede satisfaction, a causal order that is not usually discussed in models of the process. Even more importantly for the goals of this book, however, Johnson et al. offer some preliminary data suggesting a moderating (i.e., interaction) effect between communication behavior and attributions in affecting satisfaction. This role for communication and other behavior differs from that in other models in which attributions are presumed to cause behaviors, which in turn affect satisfaction.

Similarly, Joseph Forgas reviews a series of studies that attempt to determine the role that mood plays in shaping attributions. He asserts that moods are likely to affect both what people think (the content of their attributions) and how they think (the process of attribution). Forgas argues that the "affect infusion" of moods may be even more pervasive than the effects of larger emotions, and this perspective gives attribution making a permeable quality not seen commonly in other attribution work. According to Forgas, "precisely because of their low intensity and limited cognitive structure, moods may often have a more long-lasting, subtle, and unconscious influence on thinking, attribution, and communication in relationships than do distinct emotions."

Interestingly, other authors in the volume (e.g., James Honeycutt and Michael Eidenmuller in their assessment of the effects of and attributions for music on mood) provide additional support for Forgas' contentions. Denise Solomon's commentary reveals some additional important elaborations and clarifications of the role emotion plays in cognition and behavior. Rebecca Rubin and Alan Rubin also detail the connection between attributions and another cognitive and behavioral process, uncertainty reduction. They show possible ways in which people form attributions for media characters and personalities as part of increasing the closeness in their "parasocial relationships."

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Brian Spitzberg also offers an opportunity to explore the boundaries and processes of attributions, but he does so in a way that is different from those of our other authors. Spitzberg uses this forum to suggest a list of criteria by which the efficacy of theories, including attribution theories, can be judged. He then employs the criteria to assess how well attribution theories stand the test of viability. In doing so, he offers a number of challenges for researchers using attributional models. John Harvey and Julia Ormazu temper Spitzberg's critique somewhat but help show the value of looking more broadly and critically at attribution theory, particularly as applied to communication in close relationships.

In addition to a desire to explore the possible connections between attributions and communication, however, this volume provides a chance to see research that crosses interdisciplinary boundaries. Our goal was to find authors from a number of backgrounds who all are doing work relevant to the book's topic. While social psychology and communication are the primary disciplines represented, the authors in this collection also show the relevance of this research for people studying human development, family relationships, and clinical psychology. The fact that most of the researchers in this book use one another's work is testament to our belief that multiple disciplines provide important perspectives on the study of close relationships.

We hope you find this collection stimulating and useful for the work you are doing. Both John and I have found working together and with these authors to be an exciting experience. We thank them for their good work and contribution to this volume. We also are indebted to Julia Hough, Editor at Cambridge University Press, for her faith in this project. On a more personal note, John Harvey thanks Pamela and Patrick Harvey for their support. I send thanks to Chuck McSween for the time he has given me many evenings and weekends to put this collection together. During those hours, he watched over our son Cameron, who was born just as the idea for this book was conceived.

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