PEER RESPONSES TO LOW PERFORMERS: AN ATTRIBUTIONAL MODEL OF HELPING IN THE CONTEXT OF GROUPS

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We propose that low performer characteristics (cognitive ability, conscientiousness, and job experience) influence peer attributions for low performer behavior (focus of causality, controllability, and stability) and that these attributions influence the form of helping intended to benefit the group (compensating, training, motivating, and rejecting the low performer). Our model complements organizational citizenship behavior research by suggesting a new set of helping antecedents and extends applications of attributional theory by focusing on peer attributions of coworkers.

Organizations that compete in fast-paced, dynamic environments must rely on employee initiative in order to perform effectively (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Recent trends emphasizing delegation, empowerment, groups, and self-managed work teams (Galbraith, 1984; Howard, 1995; Mohrman & Cohen, 1995) further heighten the importance of cooperative, discretionary behavior at all levels of the organization (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). In this article we focus on helping behavior that is targeted at enhancing group effectiveness triggered by the attributions individual peers make regarding a coworker's low performance. We use peer attributions of locus of causality, controllability, and stability in our model to specify antecedents of four types of helping intended to benefit the group: compensating for, training, motivating, and rejecting the low performer. The proposed model extends past applications of attributional theory (Weiner, 1985, 1995) in the organizational domain (Martinko, 1995; Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981) by shifting the focus from supervisor attributions to peer attributions.

Much of the prior research on helping in organizations lies in the domain of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Organ, 1988) and similar concepts (e.g., Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). OCB is constructive behavior not required by the employee's job description and is intended to make a positive contribution to the organization; it includes helping peers with their work, orienting new hires, and volunteering for extra projects. Research on OCB has enhanced our understanding of many antecedents to helping in organizations. However, in the majority of this research, scholars have focused on characteristics of actors (i.e., affect, cognition, and disposition; e.g., Bateman & Organ, 1983; Moorman, 1991; Organ & Konovsky, 1985; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983; Williams & Anderson, 1991) and have not considered effects that coworkers have on individuals' helping behavior occurring within workgroups.

Our purpose is to develop a framework for thinking about how low performer characteristics and attributions made by their peers influence helping that occurs in workgroups. We base the model on attributional theory (Weiner, 1986, 1995) and its application in organizations (e.g., Martinko, 1985; Mitchell et al., 1981; Mitchell & Wood, 1980; Wood & Mitchell, 1981). As illustrated in Figure 1, we propose that low performer characteristics influence attributions made by peer observers. These attributions influence peer helping through effects on individuals' affect and cognition. We also consider the role of group characteristics and how they may influence the relations in the model. Our focus is on helping targeted at enhancing group effectiveness in response to a
FIGURE 1
An Attributional Model of Peer Responses to a Low-Performing Coworker

Low performer characteristics

Peer responses to a low-performing coworker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locus of causality attributions</th>
<th>Controllability attributions</th>
<th>Affective response</th>
<th>Stability attributions</th>
<th>Cognitive response</th>
<th>Behavioral response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High ability and high conscientiousness</td>
<td>External attribution P2c</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Expect no change</td>
<td>Compensate P1a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low ability or low conscientiousness</td>
<td>Internal attribution P2a, 2b</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Expect no change</td>
<td>Compensate P1b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If low controllability (low ability) P2d</td>
<td>Angr</td>
<td>Expect change</td>
<td>Train P1c</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If high stability (high experience)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If low stability (low experience) P2f</td>
<td></td>
<td>Expect change</td>
<td>Motivate P1d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If high stability (low experience)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If high controllability (low conscientiousness) P2e</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If high stability (high experience) P2f</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group characteristics
- group size
- task interdependence
- physical proximity
- homogeneity of jobs

Low performer agreeableness

Group cohesiveness

Note: Effects below the dotted line apply to all relationships above the line. For example, group characteristics moderate all relationships between low performer characteristics and peer attributions. Similarly, low agreeableness increases anger and decreases empathy. Finally, group cohesiveness moderates the links between cognitive and behavioral responses.
peer's low performance. As such, the primary beneficiary of this type of helping is the workgroup and not necessarily the low performer.

In this article we aim to make three contributions. First, we build on past CCB research by suggesting a new domain of antecedents to helping. Second, we suggest specific antecedents for four forms of helping based on peer attributions for coworker low performance. And third, we extend past applications of attributional theory in the organization domain by shifting emphasis from supervisor attributions regarding subordinates (e.g., Allen & Rush, 1998; Ashkanasy, 1989; Eastman, 1994; Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko & Gardner, 1987; Mitchell et al., 1981) to peer attributions regarding coworkers. This is important, because groups are increasingly being used in organizations (Mohrman, Cohen, & Mohrman, 1995) and because low performers are potentially threatening to group effectiveness (Silvester & Chapman, 1987). Peer helping is critical because delegation and horizontal organizing structures have increased the importance of constructive, nonscripted behaviors (Mohrman et al., 1995).

**Domain, Boundary Conditions, and Assumptions**

We specify the domain and boundary conditions of our model as relevant to ongoing workgroups in organizational settings where task and outcome interdependencies among group members are high. Accordingly, even though we occasionally draw from research in social psychology regarding helping that involves strangers and nonwork social interactions, we limit the domain of our model to helping that occurs in embedded relationships in workgroups.

A second domain consideration is cultural. Although some scholars assert that attributional processes are similar across cultures (see, for example, Weiner, 1985: 549), others argue that attributions represent implicit theories that are influenced by culture and, accordingly, are differentially distributed across cultures (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1998; Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Morris & Peng, 1994). Because most attributional research has been developed from a Western perspective, we limit our model to Western settings.

Third, we conceptualize the model at the individual level, because we draw primarily on theory conceptualized at the individual level. Although extending the model to the group level would be interesting, developing group-level constructs and composition theories that specify the functional relationships between constructs across levels (e.g., individual attributions and group attributions, individual affect and group affect, individual cognition and group cognition) is beyond the scope of this article. We also do not focus explicitly on group dynamics (e.g., how one member's attributions and affect may influence others); however, we do consider the role of group and task characteristics in the attribution process. Thus, we recognize individual variability in our model while accounting for effects of group characteristics on that variability.

Fourth, we focus on affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes of the attributional process that occur within the group. Helping within the group to benefit the group is not the only possible outcome of the attribution process. For example, group members sometimes may go outside the group (perhaps to the supervisor) for assistance in dealing with a poor performer (e.g., Ancona, 1999; Ancona & Caldwell, 1990). In addition, situations will arise when group members make controllability and stability judgments in the context of an external attribution. Although these are possibilities, they are beyond the focus of our theory building.

We make six assumptions in order to justify our predictions in adequate detail:

1. The presence of a low-performing coworker will trigger the attribution process.
2. The peer who notices the low-performing coworker is competent and capable of helping.
3. The peer who notices the low performer is committed to the group and the group's goals.
4. Situational factors (e.g., work overload, work rules, group norms, or organizational culture) do not overly constrain peer responses and prevent helping.
5. Factors not in the model that could potentially influence helping (e.g., specific rewards tied to helping or observing individual differences) are held constant.
6. A complete attributional model of helping (targeted at enhancing group effectiveness) is more complex than our description.

Our goal is not to describe a comprehensive model of helping but to provide insights that may guide future research on attributions and peer helping in workgroups. We hope our model
stimulates future theorizing and empirical research, including assessment of the boundary conditions and our assumptions.

MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Although the majority of the research on the antecedents of helping in the management literature has been focused on characteristics of the helper, we believe there are at least three reasons for considering peer characteristics in models of helping in workgroups. First, organizations are increasingly using small groups, and scholars have noted the importance of considering peer characteristics in predictive models of cooperative behavior (e.g., Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981; Tjosvold, 1986). Second, organizational citizenship researchers have explicitly identified the elicitating stimulus for helping as “someone needing aid, as in the fashion of social psychological studies of altruism” (Smith et al., 1983: 657). Third, attributional theorists have proposed that characteristics of others trigger attributions of causality, which ultimately lead to helping as a behavioral response (e.g., Weiner, 1980a,b, 1986, 1995).

Attributional Theory

An attributional process is set into motion after there is some unexpected, important, or negative goal-related outcome (Weiner, 1985). Individuals want to understand such outcomes so they can anticipate or influence them in the future. In workgroups with some degree of interdependence, the group’s performance is some function of each individual member’s performance. Because members implicitly understand this linkage, in the context of groups in which members are committed to the group’s goal, poor performance of a coworker will trigger the attributional process. This process includes three steps: attributions, emotional and cognitive reactions, and behavioral responses. The underlying foundation of the model includes three attributional dimensions: locus of causality, controllability, and stability. Figure 1 summarizes the basic process and illustrates our application to helping in workgroups in response to a low performer.

Locus of causality. Locus refers to whether the perceived cause of an event is in the actor (internal) or in the situation (external). Kelly’s covariation model (1957) suggests that internal attributions are more likely when observers perceive that an individual’s performance is different from most others’ (low consensus) and when the performance is consistent across tasks (low distinctiveness) and time (high consistency). External attributions are more likely when an individual’s performance is similar to others’ (high consensus) and when the performance occurs only in a particular task (high distinctiveness) and time (low consistency). Locus influences the focus of attention for where observers place initial responsibility for poor performance. As shown in Figure 1, we differentiate the attribution process in terms of locus and suggest a more fine-grained approach for internal attributions.

When observers believe an actor fails because of external causes (e.g., luck or task difficulty), they feel empathy or sympathy and do not hold the actor accountable for the low performance (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Weiner, 1995). In contrast, when observers believe a coworker fails because of causes internal to that person (e.g., low ability or low motivation), they focus their attention on the actor in an attempt to gather information and make further inferences regarding the underlying cause for the failure. These inferences, in turn, influence the observers’ subsequent feelings, cognitions, and behavior. Thus, in contrast to external attributions, which when made become dominant in determining observer reactions to an actor, internal attributions trigger a more fine-grained causal analysis of the actor. The distinction between external and internal attributional processes has been strongly supported by Weiner (1980a, 1985) in a series of studies on helping, in which he differentiated internal and external attributional processes. Weiner reported that when an actor needed help, a subsequent causal analysis of his or her behavior (i.e., assessing the controllability and stability of the cause) became relevant only when the cause was attributed to something internal. Consistent with this, the core elements in our model are peer inferences, attributions, and behaviors in response to poor performance attributed to an internal cause.

Controllability. In early studies of attributions and helping, researchers focused on effects of locus and found that help toward strangers was
more likely when the need for help was attributed to external causes (e.g., Berkowitz, 1969; Schopler & Matthews, 1965). These researchers, however, confounded locus with observer perceptions that the cause was under the volitional control of the actor (e.g., Barnes, Ickes, & Kidd, 1979; Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969). In our research, as recommended by Weiner (1985), we differentiate locus and controllability. Specifically, controllability assesses beliefs about whether the actor can influence causes that determine the outcome of an event (controllable) or whether the causes are beyond the actor's influence (uncontrollable). Observer attributions regarding the controllability of another's behavior cause emotional responses that influence their own behavior (Weiner, 1986). When observers attribute another person's failure or low performance to factors with low controllability, they respond with empathy, which, in turn, triggers approach behavior (Meyer & Mulherin, 1990). If, however, peers believe that the coworker's low performance was controllable, they become angry (Weiner, 1980a,b; Weiner, Graham, & Chandler, 1982).

Stability. Stability assesses whether the cause of an event is permanent (stable) or varies over time and context (unstable). Stability attributions influence expectancies regarding the likelihood that intervention can influence future performance. Expectancies are important because they have cognitive and behavioral consequences (Valle & Friesen, 1976). If an observer believes the cause of a coworker's low performance has low stability, expectancy for change is high, and efforts to influence the person will be perceived by the observer as having high utility. This perception, in turn, will increase the likelihood that the observer will intervene in an attempt to change the low performer's behavior. When there is high stability, however, expectancy for change is low, and peer observers should not expect to be successful in changing the low performer's behavior.

Applying the Prior Research on Attributions and Helping

There is support for the links among attributions (locus, controllability, and stability), affect (empathy and anger), cognitions (expectancy of change), and behavior (e.g., helping; see, for example, Brophy & Rharkemer, 1981; Graham, 1991; Meyer & Mulherin, 1980; Piliavin et al., 1969; Schmidt & Weiner, 1988; Weiner, 1980a,b, 1983; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979). However, this body of research differs from that proposed here in that it took place in public situations, where actors and observers were noninterdependent and the outcome was a dichotomy (providing versus not providing help, or intending versus not intending to help).

We apply attributional research to organizational settings in which observers and actors are interdependent and have ongoing relationships. We believe that the link between causal attributions and affect should generalize from stranger settings to organizational settings. External attributions for low performance will generate empathetic affective responses in peers, internal attributions that are viewed as uncontrollable will lead to empathy, and internal attributions that are viewed as high in controllability will generate affective responses of anger (see Figure 1). In contrast to prior research on stranger interactions, however, we suggest that the behavioral outcomes of the attribution process will differ in workgroup settings.

In stranger settings, individuals can allow their anger to lead to avoidance. They are not interdependent, do not need to help, and can simply walk away. Ongoing task interdependence in workgroups, however, makes avoidance (e.g., ignoring the low performer) a high risk for the peer and for the group. When personal rewards are dependent on group effectiveness, committed and competent peers will be proactive in responding to the low performance of a coworker. In sum, we suggest that the specific behavioral outcomes of the attribution process in ongoing workgroups will be determined by attributions for locus (ascribing responsibility for poor performance to the actor or the situation), controllability (leading to emotional responses of empathy or anger), and stability (leading to cognitive responses of low or high expectancy for change). We illustrate this typology in Figure 2 and note that it responds to Mitchell et al.'s observation that "more theory and research is needed on the attribution-behavior link" (1981: 229). We develop the logic for this framework in more detail in the following sections.
FIGURE 2
Peer Attributions for a Coworker’s Low Performance and Helping Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internal locus of control</th>
<th>External locus of control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivate</strong></td>
<td>Affect: Anger toward low performer</td>
<td>Affect: Empathy toward low performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognition: High expectancy for change</td>
<td>Cognition: High expectancy for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavior: Pep talks/threats</td>
<td>Behavior: Teach/train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Train</strong></td>
<td>Compensate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reject</strong></td>
<td>Affect: Anger toward low performer</td>
<td>Affect: Empathy toward low performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognition: Low expectancy for change</td>
<td>Cognition: Low expectancy for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavior: Complain/criticize</td>
<td>Behavior: Take on more tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High

Low

Controllability

Note: The behaviors listed in the motivate and reject cells are not exhaustive but are, rather, illustrative examples.

Effects of Locus, Controllability, and Stability Attributions on Peer Helping

Considering the joint effects of locus, controllability, and stability attributions produces four general types of peer helping behavior targeted at enhancing group effectiveness as a response to a coworker’s low performance. These types of helping are compensating for, training, motivating, and rejecting the low performer. We note the overlap between our dimensions and those proposed by Mitchell and Wood (1980) as responses of leaders to their attributions about low-performing subordinates: training, job redesign, reprimand, and dismissal. Our approach, however, differs from theirs in three ways. First, we focus on peer attributions of coworkers, not leader attributions of subordinates. Second, our behavioral responses focus on enhancing group performance and are not necessarily directed at the low-performing coworker. Finally, we propose that combinations of locus, controllability, and stability will cause different combinations of emotional and cognitive responses that result in different manifestations of behavior intended to help the group. Our first general proposition is as follows.

**General Proposition 1:** Interactions of peer attributions for locus, controllability, and stability of coworker’s low performance will predict the type of peer helping.

Effects of attributions on observer affect and cognitions. The cells of Figure 2 contain descriptive labels for the affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses that we propose will be triggered as a result of peer attributions regarding a low-performing coworker’s performance, and, thus, they depict the interactions outlined in General Proposition 1.

Low performance attributed to internal causes focuses observer attention directly on the actor and triggers subsequent causal search, which influences observer affect and expectations for change. Controllability attributions are on the horizontal axis and indicate the affective response of a peer to a low-performing coworker. Low performance attributed to causes with low controllability leads to empathy. In contrast, low performance attributed to causes with high controllability leads to anger. Stability attributions are on the vertical axis and predict peer cognitions regarding the efficacy of future efforts.
aimed at changing the low performance of the 
coworker. Low performance attributed to causes 
with high stability leads to low expectations for 
change, whereas low performance attributed to 
causes with low stability leads to high expecta-
tions for change. Low performance attributed to 
external causes, however, means that responsi-
bility is not ascribed to the actor. Regardless of 
the controllability or stability of an external 
cause for poor performance, observers will feel 
empathy for the low performer and will also 
have low expectations that efforts intended to 
change the poor performer will succeed. Next, 
we describe each of the cells and the logic for 
our propositions in detail.

External attributions: compensate. Account-
ability for poor performance is inconsistent with 
external attributions (Weiner, 1980a). For ex-
ample, peers would not be likely to hold a coworker 
responsible for poor performance if a supplier 
failed to provide adequate raw materials. Like-
wise, peers would not hold a coworker respon-
sible if the cause for poor performance appeared 
to be bad luck or if the task were designed 
effectively. When the cause of poor perform-
ance is external to the coworker, peers re-

don't only by feeling empathetic, but they also 
do not perceive a need to change the actor 
(Brown & Mitchell, 1986; Green & Mitchell, 1979; 
Mitchell et al., 1981). Accordingly, peers will 
have low expectancy for the success of actions 
aimed at improving the actor's performance 
through changes to his or her ability or effort.

We suggest that when the cause of a cowork-
er's low performance is ascribed to external 
factors, peers who are committed to group goals 
will respond by performing some of the low per-
former's tasks (compensating) in order to get the 
job done. This might include assisting the low 
performer with his or her work or assuming re-
sponsibility for part of a task.

Proposition 1a: Coworker low perfor-
mance attributed to external causes 
will result in peers performing some of 
the low performer's task elements 
(compensation).

Although our focus in this article is on types 
of helping by peers triggered by low perform-
er characteristics, we believe that controllability 
and stability attributions for external causes are 
also likely to have implications for the type of 
helping performed by peers. For example, Prop-
osition 1a is most likely when an external cause 
is also perceived to be low in controllability and 
high in stability. If an external cause is control-

able (a poorly designed task), then peers may 
attempt to help the group by pushing for some 
system change. If the external cause is unstable 
(a power outage), then peers may simply wait for 
the problem to go away.

Internal attributions—low controllability and 
high stability: compensate. When a coworker's 
low performance is attributed to internal causes 
with low controllability, peers will feel empathy. 
At the same time, however, when peers perceive 
the cause as having high stability, they will 
assume that attempts to improve the coworker's 
performance will not succeed (low expectancy of 
change). Accordingly, peers will not "waste" 
time and effort trying to train the low performer. 
The dilemma for the peers in such a situation is 
based on commitment to group goals, combined 
with empathy for the low performer. If a group 
member has a minor stroke and cannot fulfill all 
prior role expectations, for example, motivated 
and competent peers will "take on" some of the 
role responsibilities in order to help the group 
meet its goals. In essence, peers compensate for 
the low performer by intervening and expand-
ing their own roles while continuing to include 
the low performer within the social fabric of the 
group.

Proposition 1b: Coworker low perfor-
mance attributed to causes that are 
internal, low in controllability, and 
high in stability will result in peers 
performing some of the low perform-
er's task elements (compensation).

Internal attributions—low controllability and 
low stability: train. When peers perceive that 
the cause of a coworker's low performance is 
internal to the coworker but not controllable, 
they will feel empathetic (affective response). 
When the cause of the low performance is inter-

nal and peers also perceive it as having low 
stability, group members will think (cognitive 
response) that improvement is possible (high 
expectancy for change). Considering these re-
sponses together, we propose that peers will 
engage in behavior to bring the low performer 
"up to speed" on the task. These behavioral re-
sponses could include instruction and direction, 
or teaching (training), with the goal of facilitat-
ing improvement in the low performer's ability.
to contribute to group effectiveness. For example, if a poor performer demonstrates a lack of ability to learn a complex job on his or her own, peers may assist the poor performer by breaking the job down into easy-to-understand elements and then demonstrating how to prioritize them. This does not represent long-term change in roles, because the help is temporary.

Proposition 1c: Coworker low performance attributed to causes that are internal, low in controllability, and low in stability will result in peers training the low performer.

Internal attributions—high controllability and low stability: motivate. If peers attribute a coworker’s low performance to internal causes with high controllability, they will become angry. If they also perceive the internal controllable cause as being changeable (low in stability), peers will attempt to increase the coworker’s motivation in order to enhance group effectiveness and to avoid disrupting the group’s existing role structure. As an example, a low performer who is constantly napping during work because he has recently begun to patronize the local dance club several nights a week will likely be subject to “motivational” attempts by peers.

Motivational pressures are likely to vary in terms of aggressiveness. In low-aggression approaches to motivation, peers may attempt to boost the poor performer’s motivation through positive reinforcement or “pep talks” that reinforce productive behavior. In the context of groups with high interdependence, such as those we focus on here, motivational attempts may be more direct and pointed, or what Moss and Martinko (1998) refer to as “punitive feedback.” This is because high interdependence increases the relevance of poor performance to other group members.

In Moss and Martinko’s study, for example, poor performance attributed to a lack of effort resulted in immediate, direct demands for increased effort, as well as challenges to the low performer’s morals for not following through on commitments. This finding is consistent with those of others, who have found that harsh responses are triggered by the negative emotions resulting from perceptions of controllable low performance (e.g., Weiner & Kukla, 1970), such as when a low performer is perceived to be high in ability but low in effort. In situations in which there is less interdependence or in which there is a high level of interpersonal attraction among group members, however, peers may be less apt to provide punitive feedback, because it is psychologically uncomfortable to providers and receivers (Fisher, 1979; Moss & Martinko, 1998).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to specify an extensive nomological network of various types of motivational interventions, we note that the more aggressive or “punitive” forms of motivation may increase emotional conflict. This pressure and conflict may be unpleasant for the low performer, but it is driven by the peer’s commitment to the group and is a form of helping intended as a contribution to overall group effectiveness.

Proposition 1d: Coworker low performance attributed to causes that are internal, high in controllability, and low in stability will result in peers attempting to motivate the low performer.

Internal attributions—high controllability and high stability: reject. In the final cell of Figure 2, peers try to help the group by eliminating the low performer from the group. When peers attribute low performance to internal, highly controllable reasons, they will react with anger. When low performance persists (high stability) and the coworker seems to be taking advantage of others on an ongoing basis (“free-riding”), we propose that peers will intervene to help the group by rejecting (ejecting or ostracizing) the low performer. For example, peers may complain to the supervisor about a consistently lazy coworker who shows no involvement or interest in the job. Alternatively, peers may express dissatisfaction by complaining to others in the group to reduce their own intrapsychic tension (to feel better) or to distance themselves from the target (Kowalski, 1996). Some of these efforts may be obvious and others less overt. For example, peers may engage in “psychological games” to make the low performer feel uncomfortable, hoping that the coworker will leave the group voluntarily. Alternatively, peers may openly discuss social activities that exclude the low performer.

Proposition 1e: Coworker low performance attributed to causes that are
internal, high in controllability, and high in stability will result in peers trying to reject the low performer.

Low Performer Characteristics and Attributions

Having described the foundation of our model, we now expand our treatment by considering how specific characteristics of the low-performing coworker lead to specific observer attributions. We draw from research on prototypes demonstrating that observers can assess the characteristics of others with accuracy and that these prototypes convey information regarding typical ways of behaving (e.g., McCrae, 1982; McCrae & Costa, 1987). When a peer's low performance is not due to an obvious external cause (e.g., equipment breakdown, highly difficult task), observers will focus on the low performer as they attempt to understand the cause of the low performance. Because observers consider the behavior of the low performer as a potential cause (e.g., Ashkanasy, 1995; Green & Mitchell, 1979), there should be a link between the low performer characteristics that capture performance-related behavioral tendencies and the attributions that ultimately guide observer behavior (LePine, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, & Hedges, 1997). Accordingly, our second general proposition is as follows.

General Proposition 2a: The characteristics of a low-performing coworker influence the nature of the attributions made by peers regarding the coworker's low performance.

Locus attributions: effects of cognitive ability and conscientiousness. Observers make internal locus attributions when they attribute poor performance to low ability or low motivation (Weiner 1980a, b, Weiner et al., 1982). Accordingly, observers' locus attributions should relate to characteristics of the actor related to ability and motivation.

Although ability to perform a task is influenced by many factors, cognitive ability is generally the single most important determinant (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). The exact physiological structure of cognitive ability is unclear, but it is often described as information processing power (Jensen, 1998) or the ability to learn (Hunter, 1986), and, thus, it has a strong influence on task knowledge and skills that eventually translate into performance (Campbell, McCloy, Oppel, & Sager, 1993; Hunter, 1983). In a workgroup peers should be able to recognize when a coworker does not have the ability to perform because of a lack of task knowledge or skill. In such instances attributional theory indicates that peers will make internal locus attributions (the low performance is due to the coworker and not external circumstances).

Proposition 2b: Peer observers will tend to make internal attributions for low-performing coworkers with low cognitive ability.

Recently, a framework for theorizing and organizing personality has gained popularity (Ozer & Reise, 1994). This framework, called the "five-factor model of personality," or simply the "Big Five," indicates that most conceptualizations of personality contain five key factors that provide a reasonably comprehensive profile of personality. Conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality factors, is related to an individual's typical level of motivation or volition. Those who are high in conscientiousness tend to be purposeful, strong willed, determined, achievement oriented, and steadfast in working toward goals (Costa & McCrae, 1982). Those who are low in conscientiousness tend to be undependable, unreliable, lackadaisical, aimless, lazy, and eager to quit (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Based on attributional theory and the behavioral characteristics of those with low conscientiousness, we posit that observers will make internal locus attributions for a low performer who is low in conscientiousness.

Proposition 2c: Peer observers will tend to make internal attributions for low-performing coworkers with low conscientiousness.

As stated earlier, unless there is some obvious external cause of the low performance, observers will focus on the low performer to better understand the underlying cause. Indeed, observers tend to attribute failure of others to causes that are personal or internal to that individual, rather than to causes that are situational or external (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). However, we suggest that under some circumstances, peer observers might make external attributions, even if there are no obvious external causes. One of these circumstances might be when
there is no apparent internal cause for the low performance. For example, faculty members in an academic department would be unlikely to make internal attributions for the rejection of another faculty member's article if the faculty member were highly intelligent, well trained, and motivated. Instead, the peers would be likely to attribute the rejection to external causes, such as bad luck in terms of who reviewed the paper. In summary, we suggest that observers should attribute poor performance to external causes when the actor's behavior reflects both high ability and high effort, even if there is no obvious external cause.

Proposition 2c: Peer observers will tend to make external attributions for low-performing coworkers with high cognitive ability and high conscientiousness.

Controllability attributions: effects of cognitive ability and conscientiousness. As suggested by most attributional researchers, most people assume that ability is not under the direct volitional control of the individual (e.g., Weiner et al., 1971). Thus, when peers observe a low performer whose behavior reflects low cognitive ability, they make internal attributions that reflect low controllability.

Proposition 2d: Peer observers will tend to make low controllability attributions for low-performing coworkers with low cognitive ability.

Building on the above description of conscientiousness, we suggest that when an individual is dependable, reliable, lackadaisical, aimless, lazy, and eager to quit (Costa & McCrae, 1992), peers will view these behaviors as under volitional control. Most peers will view these behaviors as a function of low motivation and will hold the coworker responsible for the low performance. In other words, peers will make attributions of high controllability when they observe a coworker who is typically low in conscientiousness.

Proposition 2e: Peer observers will make high controllability attributions for low-performing coworkers with low conscientiousness.

Thus far, we have not considered situations in which a low performer has both low ability and low conscientiousness. When this is true, peers are likely to be uncertain as to the dominant characteristic of the low performer, in terms of the performance decrement. In such circumstances Mitchell et al. (1981) suggest that observers will give the low performer additional performance opportunities so that they can reduce their uncertainty as to the underlying cause. With this in mind, it is likely that peers give low performers with low conscientiousness and low ability the benefit of the doubt by making low controllability and low stability attributions. Consistent with these attributions, we expect that the likelihood of training might be greater for low performers who are low in both ability and conscientiousness.

Stability attributions: effects of job experience. Stability attributions assess whether the cause of an event will fluctuate or remain stable (Weiner et al., 1971), and, therefore, they influence peer expectancies regarding whether their efforts will lead to change in the low performer. Although several characteristics of the low performer might potentially influence stability attributions made by peers, we focus on relevant experience as an indicator of the degree to which the low performer has the capacity or willingness to change.

Prior related job experience is important for learning new jobs. For example, individuals with more job-related experience learn quickly (Gabor, 1987), and this effect is strongest when the new and old jobs are similar (Hall, 1981). There is also evidence of a curvilinear relationship between experience and learning. Initial experiences generate the largest increments in learning, and subsequent experiences generate increasingly smaller gains, up to an asymptotic level (Morrison & Brantner, 1992). This learning curve effect implies that improvement in performance is more likely for those with less job-related work experience compared to those with more experience.

We posit that individuals intuitively understand this learning curve effect and apply it when observing and interpreting the behavior of others. For example, low performance is tolerated and expected for beginners and for those with little prior relevant experience. This is because observers expect a beginner's performance to improve rapidly with experience (low stability and high expectancy for change). In contrast, when a highly experienced individual
is a low performer, he or she may be written off as a "lost cause." Here, observers infer that performance is stable and not likely to change. Although we are not aware of any direct empirical tests of this idea, it seems reasonable to expect that when individuals have little related experience, their behavior will be viewed as less stable. Similarly, when they have more experience, their behavior will be viewed as more stable.

Proposition 2f: Peer observers will make low stability attributions for low-performing coworkers with limited job experience.

Other Effects of Low Performer Characteristics: Agreeableness and Observer Affect

In the previous section we suggested how low performer characteristics influence the nature of helping through observer attributions. Next, we suggest how low performer characteristics might influence helping through other constructs in the model as well. While we acknowledge that there are many potential individual differences and effects that could be considered, we examine the effects of low performer agreeableness on observer affect. We focus on agreeableness because it has been shown to play an important role in interdependent task settings (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998; Graziano, Hair, & Finch, 1987; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1986; Neuman & Wright, 1989).

Agreeableness is a Big Five characteristic that describes the extent to which individuals are trusting, straightforward, altruistic, compliant, and tender minded (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Those who are high in agreeableness are cooperative in interpersonal settings, whereas those who are low in agreeableness are antagonistic, competitive, and hardheaded. Observers, therefore, tend to have more positive feelings about highly agreeable individuals relative to individuals who are less agreeable. Thus, in the context of our model, it is likely that low performer agreeableness has an influence on peers' affective response, in addition to that resulting from the locus and controllability attributions. That is, observers should feel more empathy for low performers who are highly agreeable and perhaps more anger for low performers who are highly disagreeable. Following the logic of our model, increased empathy increases the likelihood that observers will respond with helping in the form of training or compensating rather than motivating or rejecting. Although we acknowledge the possibility that high agreeableness in a low performer may increase positive affect because it makes internal attributions less likely (Regan, Straus, & Fazio, 1974), Dobbins and Russell (1985) found no evidence that locus attributions mediated the subordinate likableness/supervisor reactions relationship. Thus, there is support that low performer agreeableness has a direct effect on observer affect.

Proposition 2g: Peer observers will feel higher levels of empathy for low-performing coworkers with high agreeableness.

Group Characteristics As Boundary Conditions to the Model

Thus far, in our attributional model of helping, we have focused entirely on the individual level. Group context, however, can play an important role in influencing individuals' behavior within a group (e.g., Festinger, 1950; Hackman, 1992). In this section we consider the role group context might play in influencing behavioral outcomes. First, we suggest that group characteristics influence the link between low performer characteristics and peer attributions. Second, we suggest that group characteristics influence the link between intentions resulting from the attributional process and actual helping behavior. The group characteristics we consider include group size, physical proximity, task interdependence, job homogeneity, and group cohesiveness. Our general proposition is that group characteristics will strengthen/weaken the relationships described above in Propositions 1 and 2.

General Proposition 3: Group characteristics will interact with other factors in the model to influence attributions and the outcomes of attributions.

Group effects on attributions. There are likely to be systematic differences between groups in the extent to which peer observers within groups have similar perceptions and interpretations of low performer behavior. We suggest that this is because groups differ in characteristics that influence the reliability and validity of the
pool of information individual observers use to make inferences and attributions for another member's low performance.

Members of small groups, for example, have the opportunity to observe the low-performing peer. Members of large groups, however, have less opportunity to observe other members and have less detailed information about their characteristic behavior (Hackman & Vicmar, 1970). When an observer has fewer observations of a low performer, the reliability of the pool of information he or she uses to make attributions will likely be lower, and this will weaken proposed relationships.

In a similar fashion, physical proximity of group members should influence the relationship between low performer characteristics and peer attributions (Saegegert & Winkel, 1989). When group members work in proximity, they have more opportunities to observe each other, even if their tasks are relatively low in task interdependence.

Task interdependence will also influence the link between low performer characteristics and peer attributions. Groups with high task interdependence have members who work closely together, coordinating their efforts to obtain group goals. Groups with low task interdependence have members that do not coordinate their efforts as much and, therefore, will likely have less opportunity to observe their coworkers. Individuals in low task interdependence groups, thus, should have a smaller base of information from which to form attributions.

Finally, group members may not possess adequate knowledge to assess other members' characteristics and capabilities when the group is composed of individuals with different types of jobs and areas of specialization. This type of heterogeneity will make it difficult for individual members to make consistent and valid attributions for low performer behavior. In contrast, when groups are composed of individuals with similar functional backgrounds and jobs, members will better understand each other's job requirements. This better understanding should allow individual members to make consistent and valid evaluations of why a particular member is a low performer. Accordingly, because individuals in homogeneous groups will make more consistent and more valid attributions, the links between low performer characteristics and peer attributions should be stronger relative to heterogeneous groups.\(^1\) Overall, we propose the following.

**Proposition 3a:** The relationships between low performer characteristics and observer attributions will be stronger when groups are smaller, when group members work in physical proximity, when groups have high task interdependence, and when there is job homogeneity within the group.

**Group effects on behavioral responses.** We now shift our attention to characteristic interpersonal relationships within groups as an influence on the relationship between intentions resulting from the attributional process and actual behavior. When there are no externally imposed constraints, individuals behave in accordance with their own individual attributions, as we have described here. Group settings, however, create norms and pressures for conformity that influence behavior within the group (Cialdini, Levy, Herman, Kozlowski, & Petty, 1976; Festinger, 1950, 1954; Stasser, Kerr, & Davis, 1989).

Cohesion, defined as the extent to which members are attracted to the group, is a group characteristic that promotes uniformity of member feelings, thoughts, and actions (e.g., Festinger, Schacter, & Back, 1950; Schacter, 1951). Members of cohesive groups, therefore, will tend to perceive and interpret events similarly, resulting in similar views of and responses to a low-performing coworker. In addition, because highly cohesive groups can be viewed as groups with strong cultures, and assuming individuals are committed to the group and its goals, members will be especially sensitive to low performance that threatens group viability. Thus, because members in cohesive groups are likely to have more information about the low performer and because they are likely to respond similarly to this information, the link between sensemaking (attributions) and behavior (form of helping) in response to a low performer should be stronger.

\(^{1}\) A defining characteristic of teams is that they are composed of individuals who work together in order to integrate a diverse set of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in order to do a task that no individual member could do alone, given his or her set of KSAs. Thus, job or task homogeneity is less likely in true teams.
Proposition 3b: The relationships between observer attributions and helping behavior will be moderated by group cohesiveness such that the relationships will be stronger in cohesive groups.

Temporal Considerations and Model Refinements

Thus far, the focus of the proposed model has implicitly been short run; we have not addressed longer-term reactions to coworker low performance. Although we offer no formal propositions, we acknowledge this focus here and explicitly consider two effects of time.

First, and perhaps most obvious, failed attempts to change the low performer's behavior based on training or motivation should result in attributions of higher stability and lower expectancy that the low performer will change. In addition, although peers may initially feel empathetic toward a coworker who lacks ability, or when the cause for the coworker's poor performance is ambiguous (perhaps because the low performer has both low ability and low conscientiousness), continued low performance after training should lead to increased resentment. Consequently, lower expectancy for change and increased negative affect will increase the likelihood of rejecting the low performer after failed change attempts.

Second, the group development literature indicates that, over time, norms concerning task and nontask performance are negotiated and eventually become established (Gersick, 1988; Tuckman, 1965). Accordingly, there may be less within-team variability in the responses to low performers for groups that have strong norms regarding member behavior. Consequently, our individual-level model may be most applicable in new groups rather than experienced groups, where individual variability in behavior may be constrained by the group. For the same reason, our model may also be applicable in groups that have been exposed to an event that upsets the routines that guide members' behavior in more stable situations (Gersick & Hackman, 1990).

Implications

Helping has been studied for over 35 years from an attributional perspective. However, there has been no application of this perspective to research on helping in the OCB domain. Thus, one contribution of our model is the use of attributional theory as a framework for identifying predictors of helping that have not been considered to date. A related benefit of attributional theory is that it suggests an expanded domain of helping behaviors in the context of organizational workgroups. We note that these forms of helping do not exhaust the domain of helping, and our intent has not been to identify a comprehensive list. Instead, our intent has been to highlight common response patterns based on attributional processes.

Another implication of the model is the focus on helping that is intended to benefit the group and that may or may not benefit the proximal target of the behavior (the low performer). For example, although rejection may be unpleasant for the low performer, it can be beneficial to the group. To date, research and theory on OCB have not addressed competing and incompatible reasons for engaging in helping behavior. It may be interesting to explore the conditions that lead to incongruent goals: alternatives for resolving the conflict; and implications for individuals, groups, and organizations within an attributional framework (McDonald, 1995).

In the context of the OCB research, helping has been defined as the extent to which individuals orient newcomers or help others who have heavy workloads, even though their jobs do not explicitly require it. From this perspective, helping includes both training and compensating behaviors. Our model, however, suggests that training and compensating behaviors are conceptually distinct and that they can be differentially predicted. We also suggest that training and compensating behaviors will lead to differ-
ent outcomes. Training maintains existing role structures, whereas compensating changes role structures. Compensating behavior may facilitate task performance, but in extreme situations it may also lead to high levels of stress or overload for the helper and may eventually detract from individual well-being and long-term group viability. This suggests that some forms of helping may have contrasting implications for different aspects of group effectiveness (Hackman, 1992).

Although rejecting and motivating behaviors fit the definition of OCB (they are discretionary, intended to contribute to group effectiveness, and not explicitly recognized by the organization's formal reward systems), they do not correspond to the affirmative dimensions of OCB typically studied (e.g., altruism, courtesy). Even though the peer's intent is to make a positive contribution to the group, challenging a co-worker to put forth more effort or ejecting him or her from the group will upset social relationships. However, although these types of helping the group may be unpleasant and create interpersonal tension, these behaviors fit the definition of OCB, because they are discretionary and intended to enhance long-term group viability.

Future Research

Our model is fairly complex, but it is most likely underspecified. Thus, we offer several suggestions for future research that may make the model more complete.

Other antecedents. First, in future research scholars should expand the set of antecedents to helping intended to benefit the group. Our model does not include characteristics of the helper (cognitive ability, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and so on). For example, because agreeable observers should be more trusting of others' intentions (Costa & McCrae, 1992), they should have a greater tendency to make low controllability attributions for a peer's low performance. As another example, perhaps the likelihood of helping depends somewhat on the degree of similarity in individual differences of the low performer and peer observers.

We also have not included reference to the group's task and how this structure might influence the attributional process. A useful extension of the present research could involve applying a typology of task characteristics (e.g., Steiner, 1972) and considering how attributions would influence helping in different settings. For example, helping a low performer might be most important in conjunctive tasks (where group performance depends on the weakest member) and least important in disjunctive tasks (where group performance depends on the strongest member).

Finally, we note that our model describes a long causal chain, and, therefore, effects of low performer characteristics on peers' behavior would most likely be small. However, it is possible that the effects of low performer characteristics are only partially mediated. For example, peer conscientiousness might also have a direct effect on rejection. As one reviewer suggested, a peer might think, "He's lazy, and such people have no place in our group."

Group dynamics. Although we do consider the role of group characteristics in the attributional process, we do not specifically include group dynamics in our model. One direction for future research, therefore, would be to examine how an individual's attributions, affect, and behavior influence the attributions, affect, and behavior of others in the group. For example, it might be that helping is contagious. Helpful acts of one member might serve as a cue for the other group members to become more helpful. As another example, it might be that certain types of individuals carry more weight in influencing the "affective tone" of a group (George, 1990; Totterdell, Kellett, Touchmann, & Briner, 1998), which, in turn, influences the nature of attributions made for a poor performer. The literature on social influence processes (e.g., social contagion, minority and majority influence) could provide an excellent foundation for theoretical and empirical research focused on addressing these and similar questions (e.g., Asch, 1956; Burt, 1987; Gump & Kulik, 1997; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994).

Because members of groups are exposed to the same low performers—and to the extent that group dynamics such as those noted above are present—the affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to poor performers within a group should be quite similar. Therefore, it might be useful to extend our model to the group level. For this to occur, however, researchers must develop composition theories that specify the functional relationships between individual-level constructs and the analogous group-
level constructs. For example, social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) might be used in the composition theory linking individual-level attributions to group-level attributions. Specifically, individual members might make initial attributions for a poor performer that correspond to what one would expect, given individual-level attributional theory as described in this article. However, because there is likely to be some ambiguous or missing information concerning the poor performer, members might communicate with one another, leading to a socially constructed shared attribution.

**Consequences.** In our proposed model we do not address consequences for the various forms of helping. In future theory building, researchers could use attributional theory to develop outcome predictions for low performers, helpers, and for the group. It also would be interesting to consider the role of help seeking (Anderson & Williams, 1996; Lee, 1997) and whether requests for help facilitate positive responses (training and compensating).

A related topic for future research and theory development is the issue of intended helping versus actual helping. Throughout this article we have described helping behavior that is intended to benefit the group. Intentions are not always congruent with outcomes. Accordingly, we cannot assume that the helping behaviors in our model necessarily contribute to group effectiveness. In future theory building, scholars could develop a model that specifies conditions under which each type of helping would have positive outcomes for the group.

A final topic for future research might be a focus on the attributions made by those who observe the helpers described in our model. In other words, what is the effect of each type of helping (directed at improving group effectiveness) on attributions regarding the helper? Perhaps some forms of helping (training and compensating) are viewed more positively, whereas others (motivating and rejecting) are viewed more negatively. Under what conditions are these behaviors viewed as motivated by genuine concern for the group, and when are they viewed as self-serving, image-enhancing, or impression management techniques (Bolino, 1999)? When is helping viewed as helpful, and when does it become “overhelping,” which is motivated primarily by self-enhancement and impression management goals (Gilbert & Silvera, 1998)?

**Summary.** We view our model as a first step toward stimulating additional theoretical and empirical work on peer helping as a response to low-performing coworkers. We have identified a number of possible research questions, but many more surely remain. Given the increasing use of groups and teams in organizations, we believe that research addressing these questions is important for practical as well as theoretical reasons.

**REFERENCES**


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