

50 Years of Attribution Research

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While the existence of this special issue of *Social Psychology* commemorating “50 Years of Attribution Research” has multiple necessary causes, its original and most important cause is Fritz Heider, more specifically the publication of his book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* in 1958. In psychology it is only rarely the case that a single publication serves as a lighthouse, providing both the point of departure and a continuing reference point for subsequent researchers. Such has been the case for Heider’s book, which played a pivotal role in starting one of social psychology’s most extensive research programs (Lakatos, 1978). As Jones et al. (1972) put it: “It is due to Heider more than to any other single individual that attribution theory can be ‘attributed’” (Jones et al., 1972, p. xi). We will say more about the history of attribution research in our introduction to the articles of the special issue. Here, a few words about the author of the book seem appropriate (for additional information, see Weiner, 2001; Heider, 1983).

Fritz Heider’s (1896–1988) life overlapped a large stretch of the development of academic psychology, from its beginnings in the 19th century to the present, and mirrors many of the developments that took place during this time. He began his “life as a psychologist” (Heider, 1983) as a student of philosophy and psychology in Graz (Austria), where he attended the lectures of Alexius Meinong, the founder of both the Graz School of Gestalt Psychology and one of the first experimental laboratories in the history of psychology. Meinong also supervised Heider’s dissertation. Later, Heider came under the influence of the German Gestalt Psychologists, whom he met during the 1920s in Berlin; among them Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Lewin (the latter being a close friend of Heider). Like mainstream psychology, which shifted from Europe to the US during the first half of the 20th century, Heider left Germany in 1930 to work in the US, at first with Kurt Koffka at Smith College and from 1947 as Professor of Psychology at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Heider was already in his early sixties when he published *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (Heider, 1958), a book that integrated and greatly extended his previous investigations into person perception, causal attribution, common-

sense psychology, and balance. This book made this, hitherto, little-known author one of the best-known figures of social psychology.

During the 50 years that have passed since then, Heider’s ideas about causal attribution and common-sense psychology have spawned a wealth of both basic and applied research. This research has generated numerous important insights and, above all, it has provided massive support for Heider’s (1958) claim that the explanation of human behavior requires taking into account that people are “naive psychologists.” Today, this core idea underlying attribution research – people are folk psychologists, and explaining their behavior requires firm acknowledgment of this fact (see Reisenzein & Rudolph, this issue) – is widely accepted not only in social psychology, but also in most other psychological subdisciplines and in neighboring disciplines such as linguistics and cognitive science.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the book that started it all, the editors of *Social Psychology* decided to devote a special issue to “50 Years of Attribution Research.” A call for papers was sent out in early 2007. All kinds of contributions related to attribution were encouraged. As editors of the special issue, we were pleased to receive a substantial number of submissions. Based on their extended abstracts, we asked a subset of the authors to prepare full-length articles. In addition, we invited two internationally renowned investigators of common-sense psychology, Bernard Weiner and Jan Smedslund, to contribute to the special issue.

We are pleased to present the results of this project to the readership of *Social Psychology*. The contributions to the special issue “50 Years of Attribution Research” comprise articles dealing with the history of attribution research, as well as papers that report illustrative current research on classic and novel topics, documenting that even 50 years after its publication, Fritz Heider’s book continues to stimulate research.

This special issue would not have been possible without the assistance of many anonymous reviewers. Special thanks to all of them, as well as to Lily Silny for her professional editorial assistance.

We would like to dedicate this special issue of *Social Psy-*

chology to the memory of our esteemed colleague and friend Friedrich Försterling (1953–2007). We very much regret that Friedrich was no longer able to contribute to this project. A dedicated attribution researcher since his study time (which included a stay at the University of Graz, where Fritz Heider had studied some 50 years before), Friedrich Försterling belonged to the first generation of European psychologists who brought attribution theory “back home” and helped to establish it in Germany. Friedrich was the rare case of a scientist who combines a strong interest in basic research (e.g., Försterling, 1989) with an equally strong commitment to the application of theoretical knowledge to practical problems, in his case to clinical psychology (e.g., Försterling, 1985). In his most recent research, he proposed yet another novel extension of attribution theory by combining it with ideas from evolutionary psychology (Försterling, Preikschas, & Agthe, 2007). A post doc scholar of Bernard Weiner at UCLA, Friedrich can justly be regarded as one of the intellectual grandsons of Fritz Heider.

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