Stakeholders’ Perception of Organization: An Attribution and Fairness Perspective

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Stakeholders’ Perception of Organization: An Attribution and Fairness Perspective

Abstract

We draw on the normative stance of stakeholder theory to highlight the benefits of a more holistic and inclusive organizational approach to stakeholders. In this conceptual paper, we underscore the importance of human perception in engaging stakeholders and argue how often marginalized local communities involved in projects interpret an organization's behavior at the corporate, project, and individual levels. The conceptual framework we propose is elucidated through the lens of attribution theory. By doing so, we emphasize that communication serves as the source of stakeholders' attributional processes and influences their perception of fairness. Focusing on construction and infrastructure projects, we suggest that early, transparent, and informative communication with local community stakeholders facilitates their perception of fairness in terms of both the process of decision-making (procedural) and the outcome of decisions (distributive), as well as the way they are treated (interactional). Such proactive communications help mitigate biased attributions by reducing the influence of personal beliefs, fostering a conscious and unbiased attribution process. Organizations that adopt this approach in their projects will ultimately gain the benefits of broader stakeholder support.

Keywords

Stakeholder, normative, fairness, attribution theory, local community, marginalized stakeholders
1. Introduction

Stakeholder research within the realm of business and management studies has frequently embraced an organization-centric approach. In this prevailing perspective, the central organization is chosen as the primary point of focus for gathering data on stakeholders and their attributes (e.g., Bondy & Charles, 2018; Miles, 2017). Through an extensive systematic review examining 885 stakeholder theory definitions, Miles (2017) provided compelling evidence that the majority of high-quality publications pertaining to stakeholders in the fields of business and management predominantly adopt a management/strategic standpoint, rather than a stakeholder-centric view.

Conforming to the mainstream approach of stakeholder research, studies in project management do not diverge from the prevalent organization-centric outlook. In this framework, project-based organizations have typically not treated stakeholders as an end in themselves, but rather, they have instrumentally aimed to make them conform to project requirements through mechanisms of prioritization and anticipation (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2019b; Eskerod & Larsen, 2018). In this context, organizational behavior is not primarily guided by the value an organization can provide to its diverse stakeholder base, but rather by the benefits it can extract from them. It can be argued that this theoretical approach has led to an imbalanced portrayal of the discourse, with an undue emphasis on representing the perspective of the organization.

The practical ramifications of this approach include a detachment from the rationalization of stakeholder demands and concerns, and sometimes even their alignment with the organization's objectives (Aaltonen et al., 2015; Liedtka, 1996).

One could argue that the implications of this approach become even more pronounced when applied to instrumental stakeholder perspectives (e.g., as seen in works by Bourne and Walker, 2005; Johnson et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 1997). In instrumental stances, where the often-
competing resources within projects lead 'primary' stakeholders to bolster and amplify their influential role within the stakeholder network through their formal contractual ties to, or direct legal authority over, the organization (e.g., clients, sponsors, suppliers, and employees).

This organization-centric approach has at times led to the marginalization of certain 'secondary' and external stakeholder groups, such as community groups, labor unions, consumer advocates, special interest groups, and other non-governmental organizations, as noted by Aaltonen et al., (2008). In the decision-making process, the voices of these stakeholders may easily go unheard or not receive adequate priority. Since these stakeholders cannot be effectively governed through contracts, rules, and regulations, these secondary actors are external to such formal mechanisms, making it more challenging to incorporate their perspectives (Derry, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Moreover, the normative perspective in stakeholder literature (Eskerod & Huemann, 2013; Freeman, 1984; Jensen & Sandstrom, 2013) has long emphasized the importance of adopting a more inclusive approach when dealing with all stakeholders. In contrast to an exclusively economic viewpoint, the normative stance within stakeholder theory acknowledges that business inherently possesses a moral dimension, and therefore, the focal organization should seek input from all parties affected by its actions (Jensen & Sandstrom, 2013).

From both economic and social performance perspectives, organizations managing projects, especially in the context of large-scale construction and infrastructure projects, are particularly vulnerable to poor project delivery and inadequate stakeholder engagement (Denicol et al., 2020; Eskerod et al., 2015). In such undertakings, legitimate stakeholders, such as local communities, are disproportionately impacted due to their close proximity to the project development. Consequently, projects are often perceived as failures by local stakeholders when
they are excluded from decision-making processes that influence their daily lives (as highlighted by Derakhshan, 2020; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019).

In response to these challenges, there has been notable progress in the field of construction project management and beyond, with a focus on stressing the importance of greater inclusivity and giving voice to secondary stakeholders who may have been previously disregarded (e.g., Cuganesan & Floris, 2020; Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020; Teo and Loosemore, 2017). Consequently, there is a growing interest in understanding how local communities are treated and prioritized, recognizing these stakeholders as risk-bearers who can suffer directly due to their proximity to construction projects (Olander, 2007).

Likewise, many countries have enacted legislation mandating extensive communication with secondary stakeholders before granting approval for major projects, aiming to better integrate them into the decision-making process (as seen in examples like the Statutory Planning Act in the UK or the Community Empowerment Act in Scotland). However, there is a lingering question about whether this communication truly enhances the decision-making process or if it is merely a mandatory checkbox exercise to secure project approval (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018). Skepticism arises when we observe stakeholders exhibiting oppositional behavior in the context of large and intricate projects across various countries and industries, raising doubts about the organization's genuine commitment to stakeholder engagement practices.

The construction industry, in particular, provides a valuable learning platform and a fertile ground for investigating how project organizations can enhance their stakeholder engagement practices, fostering an unbiased perception of fairness and garnering support from a wider range of stakeholders. Over the past 25 years, numerous instances illustrate the consequences of projects that disregarded the social and political context, sparking local resistance due to their perceived unsustainability. These include the lengthy protests in Susa Valley against the
High-Speed Rail connecting Italy to France (Turin to Lyon) (Hooper, 2012), the riots during
the World Cup in Brazil (Watts, 2014), the violent protests in Turkey over the construction of
a shopping center in 2013 (Letsch, 2013), the national campaign against HS2 in England
(Pearse, 2020), and the obstacles faced by the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) (CEE Bankwatch
Network, 2018).

Empirical studies have sought to understand the impact of secondary stakeholders on large-
scale construction and infrastructure projects as they endeavor to legitimize such developments
within their surroundings. Notable examples include the North-South metro line in Amsterdam
(van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019) and the prolonged protests in Australia against a major
housing project (Teo & Loosemore, 2014). As these studies allude, in these cases, often
marginalized stakeholders perceived the organization's initiatives as unfair, prompting them to
engage in collective actions against the proposed developments.

In disciplines beyond construction project management, such as supply chain, operations and
marketing stakeholder research has shown that stakeholders' actions against projects represent
the final stage in a sequence of processes. This sequence commences with stakeholders
attempting to comprehend their surroundings, interpreting an organization's actions, appraising
the fairness of the terms set by the project, and then forming emotional responses (Coombs &
Holladay, 2005; McDonald et al., 2010; Tee et al., 2013). Consistent with the views presented
by Garry and Pearsall (2015) and Phillips et al. (2003), we maintain that stakeholders’
assessments of the fairness of project outcomes serve as dependable indicators of their ensuing
emotions towards the organization. As such, these perceptions are inherently integral to
stakeholder engagement. In this context, the paramount importance of acting with fairness and
ethical integrity becomes evident. This is particularly crucial for project organizations that
aspire to adopt a strategic and systematic approach in their pursuit of organizational objectives
and goals, which involves actively involving and aligning the interests of all stakeholders.
Nonetheless, it can be contended that the organization-centric approach prevalent in
stakeholder literature has restricted our comprehension of the processes undertaken by
stakeholders. While organizational justice, with its three dimensions of fairness (distributive,
procedural, and interactional) as outlined by Greenberg (1987), has long been acknowledged
as a significant factor in motivating individuals to support an organization and enhance project
performance (e.g., Aibinu et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2007), the underlying processes involved in
shaping stakeholders' perceptions of fairness at the corporate, project, and individual levels
have received only peripheral attention in project studies (Lim & Loosemore, 2017;
Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019; Unterhitzenberger & Moeller, 2023; Shafi et al; 2021).

Given this context and with the aim of advancing current knowledge within the realm of project
studies, this conceptual article seeks to address the following question: How do stakeholders
endeavor to interpret an organization's behavior, and what strategies can organizations
employ to foster unbiased perceptions of fairness?

In order to address this research question, we draw upon attribution theory to elucidate the
process underlying the development of stakeholders' perceptions of fairness. We employ
attribution theory as the framework through which we can comprehend how individuals
attempt to interpret an organization's behavior, particularly focusing on secondary stakeholder
engagement, such as the local community. Our conceptualization serves a dual purpose: it
outlines a framework that highlights communication as the mediator in shaping human
perceptions and offers a process model that can guide project organizations and practitioners
in embracing a more inclusive approach toward often-overlooked stakeholders. This approach
aims to enhance these stakeholders' perceptions of fairness at the corporate, project, and
individual levels. We underscore the significance of organizations providing clear and
transparent communication to a wider range of stakeholders, including those who have had
limited involvement in the decision-making process (often-dismissed voices). By fostering collaboration rather than manipulation, project organizations can encourage stakeholders to develop unbiased perceptions of fairness, both in terms of the process and the outcomes of the project.

In the development of our conceptual framework, we will commence by scrutinizing the issue at hand and delving into the theoretical underpinnings within the realm of project stakeholder studies. Subsequently, we will elucidate our proposed approach for addressing the theoretical gap, integrating elements from Weiner's attribution theory (1986). This integration will help us construct a conceptualization of how stakeholders interpret an organization's behavior, a pivotal aspect that serves to make a practical and theoretical contribution to the normative evolution of stakeholder theory. We will conclude our presentation by suggesting how this conceptualization can facilitate the convergence and reconciliation of insights from various perspectives on attribution theory and stakeholder engagement within the context of project studies. We will also discuss the implications of our work for both research and practical applications.

2. A Critique: Project Stakeholder Management

Widely embraced and applied in the realm of mainstream business and management studies, stakeholder theory serves as a valuable tool for comprehending the behaviors of organizations and their interactions within the social systems where they carry out projects. However, research in stakeholder theory grapples with two intrinsic limitations that hinder the realization of its full potential. These limitations are rooted in the ontology of the theory itself and in the approaches embraced by both scholars and practitioners. As we will illustrate in this section, these limitations have given rise to a significant imbalance in the treatment of various stakeholders, both in theoretical discussions and practical applications. This imbalance not only
obstructs stakeholder research from offering a comprehensive and holistic view of the debate but also adversely impacts the daily lives of secondary stakeholders, who frequently bear the brunt of negative consequences resulting from project activities.

The first limitation emerges from the process of stakeholder identification and the efforts to answer questions like "Who are the stakeholders?" and "What roles and rights do they have?" We align with Eskerod and Larsen (2018), who articulate that stakeholders are primarily recognized and categorized based on their designated roles (e.g., suppliers, end users, local community). This tendency is particularly pronounced in instrumental management approaches to stakeholders, where the concept of 'power' forms the foundation for their prioritization and significance (e.g., as seen in works by Bourne & Walker, 2005; Johnson et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 1997). This approach has, unfortunately, led to the marginalization of secondary stakeholders in numerous projects (as noted by Derry, 2012; Teo & Loosemore, 2017). It also fosters a situation where decision-making becomes detached from those stakeholders who are directly impacted by the decisions, as eloquently stated by McVea and Freeman (2005, p.60).

The second limitation arises from the methodological and practical approaches employed to derive insights from the demands, concerns, and beliefs of stakeholders, prompting the question, "How should the roles and rights of stakeholders be identified?". In the prevailing theoretical paradigms, the priorities and demands of stakeholders are often chiefly framed from the organization's perspective (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2019b; Friedman & Miles, 2002). This organization-centric approach results in a dyadic, relatively detached relationship with stakeholders (Eskerod & Larsen, 2018; Eskerod et al., 2015; Frooman, 1999). It also leads to an "unbalanced perspective in which the stakeholder voice is underrepresented, remaining a limitation of stakeholder theory" (Miles, 2017, p.448). The experiences and interests of many stakeholder groups are often only superficially considered, without a deeper exploration of how
these stakeholders themselves perceive their rights and entitlements within the context of the project (Bondy & Charles, 2018). These two limitations may not primarily impact stakeholders who possess the power to assert their voices within the organization. However, they can significantly disadvantage marginalized stakeholders, including local communities, by further weakening their positions within the stakeholder network (Derry, 2012). This impact becomes particularly pronounced in institutional systems characterized by various layers of complexity, such as large construction and infrastructure projects (Qiu et al., 2019), where the imperative for simplification often leads to extensive marginalization (Derry, 2012). Given that power is the primary determinant of stakeholder salience (Parent & Deephouse, 2007), the instrumental approach is more likely to result in the marginalization of secondary stakeholders located at a distance from the core of the project, including local communities directly affected (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022).

Similarly, in practical terms, it is crucial to acknowledge that many construction and infrastructure projects have historically been driven by the interests of the project-based organization. This history makes communication with secondary stakeholders a challenging endeavor. This challenge is not unique to developed regions; it is a recurring issue observed in developing countries as well, as exemplified by various projects documented in the works of Xue et al. (2015) in China, Jordus-Lier (2015) in South Africa, Strauch et al. (2014) in Peru, and Nguyen et al. (2009) in Vietnam, among others.

Therefore, in this article, we advocate for the normative perspective of stakeholder theory and channel our focus toward secondary stakeholders in complex social contexts, especially within the sphere of large-scale construction projects.

3. A Way Forward: Investigating Stakeholders’ Perceptions
In recent years, governments and project promoters worldwide have taken significant strides toward adopting a more stakeholder-inclusive approach. A consortium of private, public, and research institutes conducted a study, as reported by NETLIPSE (2016), which examined 15 infrastructure projects with a combined investment exceeding €50 billion. The research empirically demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with extensive stakeholder involvement in numerous large-scale projects, such as the Øresund Crossing in Denmark, the West Coast Main Line in the UK, the Bratislava Ring Road, and the Lisboa-Porto High-Speed Line.

This trend toward greater stakeholder inclusion was further underscored by the World Economic Forum in 2020, with a gathering focused on the theme "Stakeholders for a Cohesive and Sustainable World." In the forum's manifesto, Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab articulated, "The purpose of a company is to engage all its stakeholders in shared and sustained value creation. In creating such value, a company serves not only its shareholders but all its stakeholders – employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, and society at large."

While examples of stakeholder-oriented approaches are gaining traction in practical applications, they still remain somewhat limited in the realm of stakeholder research (Derakhshan et al., 2019b; Miles, 2017). Proposing a path forward, Jensen and Sandström (2013) argue that exploring communication with stakeholders from a bottom-up perspective (Burton & Dunn, 1996) and investigating the promotion of stakeholders' unbiased perceptions of fairness through such an approach (Phillips, 1997; Phillips et al., 2003) could pave the way for reimagining stakeholder engagement and inclusion through inclusive governance processes (Gil & Fu, 2022; Müller, 2017; Unterhitzenberger & Moeller, 2023).

While organizations must move beyond simply sharing the outcomes of their decisions with stakeholders and should actively encourage an unbiased perception of fairness in both process...
and outcome (Phillips et al., 2003), researchers should similarly expand the traditional
boundaries of stakeholder studies to present a more comprehensive view of the discourse. In
doing so, a promising avenue (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Stingl & Geraldi, 2017; Weiss et
al., 1999; Wong et al., 2008) involves placing stakeholders’ perceptions and emotions at the
center of research endeavors.

Against this backdrop, and as part of the growing awareness of the importance of stakeholder
engagement, our central argument revolves around the adoption of a more inclusive approach,
coupled with a stakeholder perspective. Embracing this approach necessitates reinforcing the
significance of stakeholders’ perceptions of fairness in order to achieve more compelling and
effective stakeholder inclusion (as noted by Weiss et al., 1999) and to enhance project
performance (as indicated by Lim & Loosemore, 2017; Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019). In
this section, we begin by discussing the various dimensions of stakeholders’ perceptions of
fairness and then explain how stakeholders endeavor to comprehend organizational behavior
by perceiving fairness at the corporate, project, and individual levels.

### 3.1. Dimensions of Fairness: Distributive, Procedural and Interactional

Since Rawls's seminal work in 1956 on justice as fairness, the concept of fairness has
been widely utilized as a cognitive tool through which individuals make sense of their
surroundings (Barsky et al., 2011; Leventhal, 1980). Over time, this concept found its way into
organizational studies literature, where it serves to interpret how individuals use fairness as a
crucial aspect in assessing the conditions established by organizations and the extent to which
they perceive fair treatment (Greenberg, 2003). Fairness theory, represented in works like
Ambrose and Schminke (2009) and Colquitt and Rodell (2011), distinguishes between three
types of perceived fairness: distributive, procedural, and interactional.
Distributive fairness pertains to the allocation of benefits and burdens, rewards and costs, and other factors that influence the well-being of individual members within a group or community. It encompasses whether outcomes relevant to an individual (e.g., a salary, a promotion, job security) or outcomes linked to a group (e.g., a community development program) are regarded as fair (as highlighted by Luo, 2007). The fundamental principles of distributive fairness are those that support effective cooperation to enhance the well-being of each member in economic, social, psychological, and physiological dimensions (Luo, 2007). Decision-makers can employ distributive fairness to foster cooperation by establishing standards and norms for expected behavior (Prasad et al., 2011). In the context of construction and infrastructure projects, distributive fairness can be viewed as the extent to which, at the organizational level, i) the organization embodies a 'moral nature' and ii) the distribution of rewards resulting from cooperation is considered fair in light of each party’s contribution, commitment, and assumption of responsibility.

Procedural fairness revolves around individuals’ perceptions of the formal procedures that govern decisions affecting their treatment and benefits. The fundamental premise is that the perception of fair treatment significantly influences how individuals react to decisions, making it a central determinant of their behavior (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Procedural fairness encompasses the perception of whether the procedures (or processes) underlying distributive outcomes are fair (Horvath and Andrews in 2007). It involves evaluating whether decisions and their execution are characterized by transparency and correctability. It also hinges on whether these processes are free from bias, representative of all parties, and devoid of discrimination, while also aligning with contractual specifications (Luo, 2007). In the context of construction and infrastructure projects, procedural fairness can be defined as the extent to which the decision-making process and procedures that affect the gains
and interests of each party are perceived as impartial, fair, and inclusive by a broad spectrum
of stakeholders.

Interactional fairness represents a third dimension of fairness that extends the concepts of
distributive and procedural fairness. It offers a more refined distinction between individual and
organizational levels of fairness. Interactional fairness focuses on the quality of treatment and
communication provided to individuals by project personnel (Colquitt et al., 2001). From this
perspective, it underscores the quality of dialogue and how effectively project managers can
communicate and interact with their stakeholders in a respectful and equitable manner (Kujala
& Sachs in 2019). Interactional fairness encompasses the explanations given to convey the
rationale behind organizational processes and outcomes. It also centers on individuals'
perceptions of the quality of the interpersonal treatment they receive during the execution of
organizational procedures (Jawahar, 2002).

This dimension involves interactions between individuals within an organization and those
outside it, including stakeholders, as they engage with one another (Ambrose et al., 2002).

Farrar et al. in 2019 emphasize that interactional fairness encompasses the quality of
interpersonal treatment, including elements such as politeness, dignity, and respect, as well as
the adequacy of information provided to individuals. It pertains to the quality of interaction
between project stakeholders and project authorities, such as project managers or
communication managers, and to what extent stakeholders receive equitable interpersonal
treatment and sufficient information throughout the engagement process.

Procedural and distributive fairness are theoretically distinct (Colquitt et al., 2001), yet they
both hold significant importance. An individual's assessment of their experiences with project
and organizational practices is a unique judgment that takes into account both the outcome and
the process (Greenberg, 2003). The evaluation of fair treatment signals a positive intention on
the part of the organization (Hewett et al., 2019). While the first two dimensions of fairness
primarily address the formal aspects of the exchange process, interactional fairness shines a
spotlight on the social dimension of the process (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

These three dimensions of fairness have been explored by several researchers in the field of
project studies and construction project management. Kodefors (2005) delves into fairness in
contractual and procurement arrangements in two projects in Sweden. Similarly, Zhang et al.
(2016) investigate the perception of fairness based on the perceived effects of risk allocation
on contractors' cooperative behavior in construction projects in China. Ng et al. (2007)
icorporate the concepts of distributive and procedural fairness to develop a dynamic conflict
project management system for dispute resolution. Aibinu et al. (2011) find that construction
projects in Singapore are positively impacted by the perceived fairness of distributive
outcomes, leading to a reduction in conflicts and disputes. In a recent empirical study by
Unterhitzenberger & Bryde (2019), it is demonstrated that project performance improves when
procedures are in place for the fair treatment of project team members, fair allocation of
resources, and interactions characterized by respect, propriety, and dignity. Similar results have
been recently reinforced in the project context by Unterhitzenberger and Moeller (2023) and
Shafi et al. (2021).

Highlighting the significance of inter-organizational justice, Loosemore and Lim (2015)
initially focus on the three dimensions and the level of fairness across different construction
project types. Later, in 2017, they find that these three dimensions can be correlated, and that
managerial practices must actively influence all three aspects of fairness to be effective (Lim
and Loosemore, 2017).

It can be argued that organizations have traditionally emphasized the fairness of their outcomes,
ensuring the equitable distribution of dividends to stakeholders. This focus is evident in
contracts, codes of ethics, and mission statements that are established to guide an organization's strategic direction. However, the perception of procedural fairness, which pertains to the fairness of the processes leading to outcomes, has often been overlooked. Stakeholders are frequently excluded from having a say in how decisions are made, as indicated by Phillips et al. (2003) when they refer to stakeholders not having a role in "how the pie is baked" (p. 487).

Regarding the perceived fairness of policies and norms established at the corporate level to make decisions (distributional fairness), organizations often consider themselves autonomous decision-makers and do not involve a broader range of stakeholders in the processes that lead to the final outcomes (procedural fairness). Consequently, certain stakeholders, like local communities, are often disregarded in comparison to primary actors such as shareholders. They are not fully informed about their proportional contributions in any cooperative endeavor, and the processes behind decision-making are not adequately explained, nor is the quality of information provided. This lack of organizational communication prevents stakeholders from perceiving fair treatment in the organization's behavior (interactional fairness).

As discussed in this section, a comprehensive normative stakeholder approach encompasses fairness not only in the outcomes shared with stakeholders (distributive) but also involves stakeholders in the decision-making processes that affect them the most (procedural). This approach also places importance on the quality of communication with stakeholders, which includes elements such as politeness, dignity, and respect (interactional). In the next section, we will delve into how stakeholders perceive an organization's outcomes, processes, and interactions, offering project organizations a deeper understanding of how their strategic and tactical decisions are perceived as fair by a broader range of project stakeholders, particularly secondary actors.
4. The Process of Perceiving Fairness

The cognitive process through which stakeholders appraise the fairness of an organization's actions comprises two key elements. First, individuals observe and evaluate the changes implemented by the project, essentially assessing the organization's behavior based on the extent to which these efforts improve the lives of the intended beneficiaries and society as a whole (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). Existing studies in the field of organizational behavior have demonstrated that this evaluation process involves a comparative aspect, leading to the perception of fairness or unfairness in some form (Martinko et al., 2002).

The subsequent stage of this cognitive process involves an analysis of the causes that have led to the perceived fairness or unfairness among stakeholders (Hewett et al., 2019). Previous research indicates that stakeholders react to an organization's activities based on the causal factors they attribute to the organization's involvement in these initiatives (Phillips et al., 2003). It is widely acknowledged that these perceived causal factors significantly influence how stakeholders perceive the fairness of the situation (e.g., Greenberg, 2003; Hewett et al., 2019; Martinko et al., 2002).

While various theories have been employed to describe the processes and reasons behind stakeholders' causal reasoning (Martinko et al., 2002), we contend that attribution theory offers the most comprehensive and integrated explanation of how stakeholders perceive the causes behind organizational behavior. Our argument regarding the central role of attribution is based on two primary models within attribution theory. The first model, developed by Kelly (1973), focuses on how individuals use information to form attributions. The second model, introduced by Weiner (1986), explains what information individuals employ in their attributional processes. In the following section, we will provide detailed explanations of both these models before applying them to the realm of project studies.
Human beings, often described as "naïve psychologists" in Heider's (1985) words, possess an innate inclination to attribute events to specific causes. Attribution theories offer valuable frameworks for analyzing how individuals ascribe causality when interpreting events in their environment (Gardner et al., 2019; Martinko & Mackey, 2019). Despite their significant potential for explaining a wide range of workplace behaviors, attribution processes have been underutilized in organizational literature (Martinko et al., 2011; Weiner, 2019) and, to the best of our knowledge, have not been applied in the field of project studies. This is somewhat surprising given that attributions serve as reliable predictors of human behavior (e.g., Martinko et al., 2007), and we believe they are essential for understanding stakeholders' perceptions and their subsequent emotions and responses when supporting or opposing a project or program.

In this paper, we introduce attribution theory to the field of project stakeholder management as a theoretical framework for explaining how secondary stakeholders attempt to make sense of organizational behaviors by attributing causes to their initiatives. We will begin by elucidating how individuals make attributions and the type of information they rely on. Subsequently, we will apply these theoretical constructs to the subject of our study.

4.1. The Attribution Theory Explained

In organizational studies, the term 'attribution' encompasses two primary meanings. The first involves individuals attempting to answer the 'why' question, seeking explanations for behavior, while the second is concerned with inferring traits from behaviors and assigning blame (Shaver, 2012). As Malle explains, the common element in both definitions is that "in attribution as explanation, a behavior is assigned to its cause; in attribution as inference, a quality or attribute is assigned to the agent based on an observed behavior" (2011, p.72).

In explaining how individuals attribute causality, Weiner (1986) identified three dimensions of cause that people use to judge situations. The first dimension is the locus of the cause, which
can be either internal or external. Internal loci are rooted in the traits or intentionality behind acts and behaviors, while external loci are due to reasons outside of the agents and are therefore less controllable by the perceiver. The second dimension is the stability of the cause, assessed by considering whether the cause changes over time. The third dimension pertains to the controllability of the cause, addressing the level at which the cause could be controlled. According to the theory, these attributions can lead to the emergence of feelings on the part of stakeholders. Therefore, to effectively manage stakeholder emotions regarding the project organization, it is crucial to understand the attributional process they undertake.

Expanding on Kelley's seminal work (1973), several researchers have theorized that there are three main sources of information that individuals use to make attributions about others' behavior: information about the stimulus, beliefs based on prior experiences, and motivation to make attributions (Harvey et al., 2014; Hewett et al., 2019; Martinko et al., 2002). According to Kelley and Michela (1980), these three factors work together to shape attributions and are not consciously distinct when used by humans. Any piece of information acquired by an individual has the potential to trigger an appraisal of the situation (Hewett et al., 2019; Martinko et al., 2002). This information can be obtained from an individual's observations or experiences (Martinko et al., 2007) but must be significant enough to motivate the individual to initiate attributional processes.

Stakeholders' attributions are similarly based on deep stimulus, beliefs, and motivations drawn from their prior experiences. This concept aligns with Heider's work (1958), which explains that individuals' causal attributions of others' behavior are influenced by their general perception of those parties. In the context of organizational studies, this second source of information is defined as legitimacy (Derakhshan et al., 2019a) or an organization's cynicism (Hewett et al., 2019), reflecting an individual's attitude toward the organization as a whole, including its policies, procedures, and management. Furthermore, the study by Munyon et al.
explores how attribution theory sheds new light on the firm-level, indicating that consumer judgments can have costly firm-level consequences in the form of reputational damage, diminished purchase intentions, and increased legal consequences.

The cognitive process of making attributions is undertaken by individuals only when they perceive that the information they receive is important to them (Weiner, 1986). This highlights the significance of perceived relevance of the practice, which can be defined as the extent to which individuals are interested in and dependent on changes in their environment (Sivacek & Crano, 1982; Gardner et al., 2019). Perceived relevance serves as a motivation for individuals to process information about their experiences and observations in order to uncover underlying causes.

Given that the human brain has limited capacity, processing vast amounts of data to discern the reasons behind behaviors is facilitated by organizing and storing information through categorization, such as assigning traits to others (Lord & Smith, 1983; Lind, 2001; Srull & Wyer, 1980). Categorization, based on previous experiences or beliefs, is considered a fundamental aspect of attribution-making. Feldman (1981) introduced two types of attributional processes: automatic and non-biased. The human brain can consciously engage in the non-biased attribution process, where the perceiver has full control over the data being processed by the brain to develop attributions. This controlled attribution process can be explained through three main steps. First, it involves the conscious observation of others’ behavior and the impulse to initiate attribution. Second, it encompasses the analysis of this behavior based on observed or experienced information to identify the cause that led to its occurrence. Finally, it entails the selection of one primary cause that explains the behavior's occurrence, including an assessment of whether this cause reflects a specific trait of the agent.
When individuals decide to assign a specific category or trait to an agent based on their observations, all subsequent judgments about that agent are automatically interpreted through the lens of that assigned trait. This process, known as automatic categorization, significantly reduces the amount of data processing that humans need to undertake to attribute a cause to a behavior. However, it's also the primary reason for individuals' attributional biases (Derakhshan et al., 2019a; Hewett et al., 2019).

As Taylor and Fiske (1978) explained, people tend to stop searching for the causes of behaviors once they find the first satisfactory and salient cause. Feldman (1981) and later researchers like Martinko et al. (2007) and Hewett et al. (2019) expanded on Taylor and Fiske's work, suggesting that when there are different explanations for a behavior, the first salient explanation is often selected as the cause. These salient sources are typically either distinctive qualities of the agent or a specific cause stored in the observer's memory (a trait previously assigned to the agent). For humans, these traits are considered salient in determining causality, and thus, knowing an agent from the past or considering a particular trait associated with them influences the interpretation of their behavior in the present.

Furthermore, categorization isn't solely used to reduce the amount of data processing. During attributional processes, categorization is also relied upon as a foundation for making assumptions in situations where specific information is unavailable (Wyer & Srull, 2014). Therefore, causes identified through automatic attribution processes are likely to be inaccurate and, in some cases, incorrect (Feldman, 1981). As will be explained below, these automatic processes are associated with several biases that have long been studied by attribution scholars (Billet & Qian, 2008; Doukas & Petmezas, 2007).

In situations where information is lacking, individuals tend to invoke internal causes (attributing behavior to an organization's traits) more frequently than external causes.
attributing behavior to reasons outside the organization's control) (Carson, 2019; Weiner, 1986). Internal causes are more often considered the primary reason behind a given behavior, especially in cases with severe and negative consequences, while external causes are more likely to be ascribed to behaviors with trivial or positive outcomes.

When a behavior leads to severe negative consequences, individuals tend to attribute it to the intentionality of the organization responsible for the action. Conversely, when the outcomes are positive, the cause is typically attributed to factors outside the organization's control (Feldman, 1981; Martinko et al., 2007). It appears that individuals are more inclined to attribute internal causes to the "good" behaviors of organizations they like and the "bad" behaviors of organizations they dislike. In other words, the positive actions of liked organizations are more often attributed to their traits, while negative actions are considered to be due to external causes. Conversely, the positive actions of disliked organizations are more likely to be perceived as accidental or unintentional, while their negative actions are attributed to their traits, implying intentionality.

4.2. The Attribution Theory Mobilized

Understanding how stakeholders perceive an organization's actions at the individual level is crucial for organizations striving for normative behavior. Such organizations are motivated to share their decision outcomes and processes with stakeholders to enhance their perception of fairness. They make efforts to reach decisions that are considered fair by stakeholders. According to Phillips (1997), for a decision to be fair, it should take into account the risks, costs, and contributions of all network stakeholders. The decision outcome may involve benefits or costs imposed on secondary stakeholders, like local communities. For example, this could include the environmental degradation resulting from specific project activities or infrastructure development as part of a community development program agreed
upon with the local government. However, individuals within the local community will form
their own perceptions based on available information, considering whether the project
organization had control over the causes of the outcome or if the outcome was a result of
external conditions (Weiner, 1986; Weiner et al., 1988). This attributional process will lead to
judgments about the fairness of the organization's decisions and subsequent actions either in
support or opposition to the organization.

In the stakeholder's initial interactions with the organization, their attribution processes are
conscious and non-biased. This means that when individuals perceive changes in their
environment that are relevant to them, they consciously seek information to attribute causes to
these changes. However, when information is lacking, attribution biases come into play,
leading individuals to consider the organization's intentionality behind negative outcomes and
attributing positive outcomes to external causes beyond the organization's control.

Over time, these attributions combine and form the individual's beliefs about the organization
or its traits. After numerous such observations, attributions solidify into an individual's
perception. Given that fairness is perceived from the outcome (distributive), process
(procedural), and communication among individuals (interactional), stakeholders use these
three dimensions to evaluate whether the organization is fair in decisions that affect them. As
Malle (1999) emphasizes, an organization's past behavior is considered the cause behind its
present behavior. In organizations where often disregarded stakeholders lack sufficient
information to attribute the real cause behind organizational behavior, stakeholders attempt to
guess the underlying processes that led to the emergence of a particular outcome (Wyer &
Srull, 2014).

In an organization that excludes secondary stakeholders from the decision-making process,
these disregarded stakeholders tend to perceive the organization as cynical. They automatically
attribute negative behaviors to the organization's traits and assign beneficial acts to external
causes. From the individual's standpoint, further considerations of the causality of negative
impacts are automatically rejected because they have found what they consider a satisfactory
reason (Ross, 1977). As suggested by Feldman (1981) and Malle (1999), in such circumstances,
if an accident that is out of the organization's control has a negative impact, the individual is
likely to automatically blame the project organization for that accident. Thus, despite not being
factually accurate, the perception of the project organization's "untrustworthiness" becomes the
most salient explanation for this unfortunate event, leading stakeholders to develop negative
emotions toward the organization and eventually engage in collective actions against the
project.

However, automatic attribution can be replaced by a more conscious process. A conscious
categorization process, which is less biased, is triggered when incoming information deviates
significantly from a stakeholder's pre-assumed traits or expectations. In such cases, individuals
become motivated to make attributions about the causality of the emergent information.
Because the new pieces of information do not align with the previously established traits of the
project organization, individuals seek other reasons behind the organization's recent behavior.

Lord and Smith (1983) explain that the level of information processing plays a significant role
in reducing biases in the attribution process. The rule of thumb is that when a high level of
information is available, a conscious and non-biased attribution is made, and the frequency of
attribution biases diminishes during the process. Research by Jeong (2009) on post-crisis
communication following an oil spill, for instance, confirms that stakeholders made higher
internal attributions and lower external attributions about the oil spill accident when a high
level of information was provided to them by the project organization, compared to when low
levels of information or no information were provided.
Drawing from attribution theory, this section has outlined the process through which stakeholders attempt to make sense of an organization's behavior by evaluating the changes in their surrounding environment due to project activities. In light of the above discussion, the conceptual framework for the study is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework - Stakeholders’ attributional processes towards the project organization

### 5. Contributions to Theory and Implications in Practice

In this article, the aim was to understand how secondary stakeholders, who are often disregarded and marginalized, make sense of an organization's behavior and how the organization can promote a non-biased perception of fairness among these stakeholders. This question is crucial for project organizations seeking support from a broader range of stakeholders, including local communities affected by large construction and infrastructure projects. Attribution theory was used to explain the process that stakeholders go through in
perceiving fairness. The study emphasizes the significance of human perceptions in project stakeholder management, and the theoretical and practical implications of the research are presented below.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The conceptualization developed in this study aligns with the normative stance of stakeholder theory, which places significant importance on fair treatment among a broad range of project stakeholders (e.g., Phillips et al., 2003; Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2023). This research is grounded in the moral aspiration that project organizations should aim to meet and exceed stakeholder expectations by understanding how stakeholders perceive the changes brought to their environment (Freeman et al., 2010). It underscores the ethical responsibility of decision-makers to consider the demands, concerns, and interests of various stakeholders, including those like local communities who lack formal contractual relationships or direct legal authority over the organization (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022).

As highlighted in this study, even organizations with the intention of fairness may unintentionally exclude stakeholders from the decision-making processes that most affect them, leading to perceptions of unfairness. From this perspective, the concept of "legitimacy" becomes a central element for engaging and including secondary stakeholders in the decision-making process, as opposed to the "power" and resource-exchange view often emphasized in instrumental formulations of stakeholders (Derakhshan et al., 2019a).

While an organizational justice approach has been claimed through a more stakeholder focused form of governance (e.g., Gil & Fu, 2022; Müller, 2017; Unterhitzenberger & Moeller, 2023); this study contributes to the evolving literature on organizational management practices,
shifting from an organization-centric approach to a stakeholder-centric approach, recognizing
the often-overlooked aspect of the stakeholder debate. It builds on the work of scholars who
have explored stakeholder management practices from the perspective of the organization, and
it advances the understanding of how project organizations can promote fairness and
inclusiveness among secondary stakeholders in decision-making processes (Derhakshan 2020;
Malle, 2011).

This research represents a pioneering effort in project management studies by departing from
the conventional definition of stakeholders as entities with specific roles and rights (e.g.,
Friedman & Miles, 2002). Instead, it delves into the stakeholder attribution process, exploring
how stakeholders' perceptions of fairness are shaped, which can subsequently lead to project
opposition or support. The study contributes to the limited body of work within stakeholder
theory that underscores the significance of stakeholders' perceptions and emotions as valuable
sources of knowledge for organizations to support decision-making.

In contrast to studies that examine projects from the perspective of fairness or justice theories
(e.g., Unterhitzemberger & Briyde, 2019; Unterhitzemberger & Lawrence, 2023 Shafi et al.,
2021), our findings emphasize that the perception of fairness is influenced by stakeholders'
experiences and observations at three distinct levels: first, the outcome shared with them,
initiated by the organization at the corporate level (distributive fairness); second, the decision-
making process discussed with them at the project level (procedural fairness); and third, the
overall quality of treatment provided by project authority figures (interactional fairness).

By applying this tripartite framework, our research underscores that for managerial practices
to be effective, they must actively influence all three dimensions of fairness. This provides a
nuanced perspective on stakeholder management, recognizing that fairness is not solely
dependent on the outcomes but also on the processes and interpersonal interactions that shape
stakeholder perceptions. While the dimensions of fairness, including distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness, are all crucial for achieving stakeholder satisfaction, stakeholder management practices have historically placed a stronger emphasis on the final outcome of the project (distributive fairness). However, a normative interpretation of stakeholder theory emphasizes that decisions about these outcomes should involve active communication with stakeholders and should not be confined to the organization, shareholders, and other primary influential stakeholders as the sole decision-makers.

This study underscores the necessity of involving stakeholders in the decision-making processes behind an organization’s initiatives (procedural fairness). It also highlights the importance of providing stakeholders with high-quality engagement and adequate information (interactional fairness) to ensure that stakeholders perceive fairness not only in the outcomes but also in the processes and interactions that shape their experiences. In doing so, organizations can strive to enhance stakeholder satisfaction and achieve a more comprehensive and equitable approach to stakeholder management.

5.2. Managerial Implications

In terms of practical implications, this study advocates a paradigm shift towards adopting a stakeholder perspective, with a particular emphasis on actively engaging and communicating with secondary stakeholders right from the inception of complex systems like large construction and infrastructure projects. While existing stakeholder communication literature has long emphasized that involving secondary stakeholders in the decision-making process enables an organization to better understand their demands, shared risks, and interests (e.g., Eskerod & Larsen, 2018), this study takes it a step further by suggesting that effective communication significantly impacts how stakeholders perceive the fairness of project conditions across three distinct levels: corporate, project, and individual.
By embracing a normative commitment and providing disempowered stakeholders with an adequate level of information, these attributional processes become more conscious, ultimately reducing the influence of biases. The study proposes a process model to guide practitioners in adopting an inclusive and normative approach aimed at enhancing stakeholders' perception of fairness across corporate, project, and individual levels, as illustrated in Figure 2. This model serves as a practical tool for organizations to actively engage with their stakeholders and improve fairness in project-related decisions and actions.

Figure 2: Process model towards stakeholders’ perception of fairness in projects

Figure 2 illustrates that at the corporate level, project organizations should engage in transparent and ethical communication regarding their commitment to meeting and surpassing stakeholder needs and expectations (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007). Decisions related to value distribution among a wider spectrum of stakeholders should be formulated at the corporate and strategic levels, guided by a normative ethical code of conduct, policies, and norms. This ensures that stakeholders perceive the distribution of benefits and harms fairly, which impacts the well-being of individual group members and the community.
To achieve this, a clear top-down message should be conveyed from the corporate level to the interface where project communicators and project managers engage with secondary stakeholders. This message should stress the importance of effective collaboration in the decision-making process, not only guaranteeing fair treatment but also fostering perceptions of fair procedures among stakeholders. Policymakers and project promoters have already made substantial progress in this direction. For example, the use of balanced scorecards (Kaplan & Norton, 2001) in large construction and infrastructure projects can help compare the impact on stakeholders, balancing it with the project's goals. Legislation like the 'Statutory Planning Act' or the 'Community Empowerment Act' has been beneficial in promoting consultation and participatory planning. However, it's important for project organizations to be mindful that stakeholders may view these initiatives as merely box-checking exercises for project approval (e.g., Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018). Therefore, project organizations should be diligent in their stakeholder communication to ensure that their genuine commitment to fairness is well-perceived.

At the project level, organizations should aspire to create an inclusive decision-making process that is transparent, correctable, and representative of the often-overlooked voices of stakeholders. By viewing stakeholders as an end in themselves, project managers should apply the ethical stance and core values of the organization at the project level. Stakeholder satisfaction should be the goal of an organization transitioning to an inclusive decision-making process and embracing bottom-up collaborative forms of engagement. The project organization should consider the impact and benefits delivered to a diverse and cohesive array of stakeholders, such as local communities, by actively listening to and incorporating their perspectives for mutual benefit.
We define communication as a tool for providing information to motivate and support stakeholders' attributional processes. While it's beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive list of communication approaches, we suggest that, in line with this definition, project managers should choose and employ diverse means and methods for sharing the decision-making processes and engagement with a broad range of stakeholders. Depending on the project context and the stakeholders involved, these methods may include meetings with representatives (Yalegama et al., 2016), public hearings (Kivilä et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2017), or continuous updates through social media (Lobo & Abid, 2019; Ninan et al., 2019).

Communication can range from simple, one-on-one discussions between managers and individual stakeholders to more complex interactions when multiple stakeholder interests are involved (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003). Regardless of the approach, the purpose of this communication is to inform and engage stakeholders in a way that supports their attributional processes. It is essential to ensure transparency and the flow of adequate information. Project practitioners should also recognize that communication with stakeholders is incomplete if it doesn't extend to individuals within the project organization who have authority, such as project managers, at the individual level.

When information is lacking, stakeholders' perceptions of fairness become biased and distorted. This is especially significant for disregarded or marginalized stakeholders, such as local communities, who are often not included in communication efforts required by many regulations. Their perceptions of the project may only become apparent when they directly experience or observe tangible outcomes.

One of the fiduciary obligations of the project organization is to maintain constant communication with stakeholders throughout the decision-making process. This communication not only encourages stakeholders to engage in positive attributional processes
but also fosters the perception of fairness as a fundamental aspect of decision-making. It also helps reduce biases in the attributional processes of stakeholders, as highlighted by Lord and Smith (1983). It's in situations with insufficient information that the impact of these biases becomes significant. Therefore, providing stakeholders with adequate information is essential for them to correctly attribute the locus of cause, and project organizations should work toward achieving this goal.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This paper commenced by questioning the underlying assumptions of stakeholder theory and uncovered certain underappreciated aspects of stakeholder management studies. It explored the three dimensions of perceiving fairness through the framework of attribution theory to provide insight into how stakeholders' perceptions of organizational behavior are shaped through cognitive processes carried out by stakeholders. This attribution theory perspective laid the foundation for a deeper understanding of the importance of stakeholder perception in garnering stakeholder support and satisfaction. The study revealed that the perception of fairness operates at various levels and that decisions regarding value-sharing with stakeholders should be formulated at the corporate level and implemented at the project level. Furthermore, the actual perception of fairness is constructed at the individual level.

The main objective of this research was to offer guidance on how organizations can foster a non-biased perception of fairness among secondary stakeholders, who are often overlooked in the decision-making process. The study focused primarily on the role of communication as a mediator between an organization's behavior and stakeholders' attributional processes, leading to their subsequent perceptions of fairness. Given that the purpose of organizational
communication is to inform stakeholders and stimulate their attributional processes, the
transparency and provision of sufficient information are of utmost importance. This approach
ensures that stakeholders develop a conscious and non-biased perception of an organization's
actions and behaviors.

The study acknowledges its limitations, which primarily arise from its conceptual nature and scope. This research paves the way for future empirical studies in the field of stakeholder engagement. Given the novelty of the concept under investigation, this study adopted a conceptual approach. Empirical research within the realm of project studies is required to validate and build upon the findings of this research. It's important to note that this article primarily examines stakeholders' perceptions of fairness, and it does not delve into the study of stakeholders' emotions or actions. These later stages may also be influenced by various contextual factors, such as the characteristics of the stakeholders themselves or their networks within the societal or project environment. This study focuses on the initial step of analyzing perceptions, leaving the examination of stakeholders' emotions and consequent actions for future research. Future research could explore how these perceptions evolve into stakeholders' emotions and subsequent actions.

Furthermore, attribution theory, as a theoretical framework with significant unexplored potential, provides a strong basis for further empirical investigations into stakeholders' perceptions and cognitive processes. While this research utilized the attribution theory framework to initiate a discussion on how project stakeholders attribute organizational behavior, it's important to recognize that the individual attributions explored in this study do not directly translate into collective attributions by stakeholder groups. Nevertheless, consistent with previous research, it is recognized that group attributions by stakeholders can significantly influence the attributions made by individuals within that group. Future empirical research
could investigate the mechanisms by which individual attributions are transferred to the group level and under what conditions individual perceptions prevail and become the final judgment of stakeholder groups regarding an organization's behavior.

While our conceptualization is specifically situated within the context of the construction and infrastructure industries, we believe that the reasoning and principles discussed can be applied to a wide range of projects that have a significant impact on various secondary stakeholders. This includes projects in industries like extractive resources and major development projects.

We encourage future scholars in the field of project management to further build upon this study, complement the research presented here, and expand our understanding of how project-based organizations can effectively engage secondary stakeholders. Such research can contribute to the long-term success and sustainability of projects in various sectors.

References


Leventhal, G. S. (1980). What should be done with equity theory?. In *Social exchange* (pp. 27-55). Springer, Boston, MA.


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<th>Comments of Reviewers</th>
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<td>I do have appreciation for your research paper, which aims at discovering how the often disregarded ‘secondary’ stakeholders attempt to make sense of an organization’s behavior, and how this perception can be promoted by the organization to achieve non-biased stakeholder’s perception of fairness. The study emphasizes that demands and concerns of stakeholders particularly of local community need to be considered in empirical studies as well as practical aspects. By applying attribution theory, it highlights the importance of stakeholder-approach to ensure long benefits of organizations and projects. It also underscores that project organizations need to provide clear and transparent communication to a broader range of stakeholders, such as those that have had little to say in the decision-making process (the often-disregarded voices).</td>
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<td>The paper, however, has issues that require revisions and/or further re-work as presented section-by-section.</td>
<td>We are grateful for the reviewer’s valuable advice on the entire manuscript. Having addressed each point made, we feel that the quality of the work has been truly improved, and we sincerely hope that the reviewers agree. We appreciate the reviewer’s comments and have incorporated them in this new revision of the article. In doing so, we have more clearly emphasized the contribution of this conceptual paper and explained the need for this research effort. We believe that the updated manuscript has improved considerably and hope that it will match the standard expected by the reviewer and the journal.</td>
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<td>Thank you for your careful attention. We went through all article and provided a thorough English editing in all sections. All the points mentioned by you are also carefully considered.</td>
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<td>...at the corporate, project, and individual level. Here, use 'levels' in place of level.</td>
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'procedural instead of 'distributive'. Similarly, distributive fairness relates to the outcome of decisions.

The sentence is complex.

Such communications lead to less biased attributions as they reduce the influence of personal beliefs in achieving a conscious and non-biased attribution mode.

Attribution is redundant in this sentence.

Introduction

On page 2, paragraph 1, Line 9: replace ‘has not’ by hasn’t

The following sentence on page 5 is too long and very complex to understand.

Stakeholder literature in other disciplines outside the construction project management field has elucidated that stakeholders' actions against projects are the last step in a series of processes that begin with stakeholders trying to make sense of their environment, perceiving an organization’s behavior, evaluating the fairness of the conditions made by the project, and developing emotions in response (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; McDonald et al., 2010; Tee et al., 2013).

Concerning the following sentence on page 5:

However, it could be argued that the organization-centric approach recorded in stakeholder literature has limited our understanding of the aforementioned processes undertaken by stakeholders.

But, the processes undertaken by stakeholders were not well introduced in the previous sections.

4.2. The Attribution Theory Mobilized

By understanding how stakeholders make sense of the

Thanks for this observation. We have provided much better clarity in our writing and the mentioned point has been addressed in text.
organization actions at the individual level, organizations with an inclination to normative behavior tend to be better motivated to share the outcomes and process of their decisions with stakeholders enhancing their perception of fairness.

In the above text, the usage of ‘their’ is confusing! The first ‘their’ represents organizations but, the second ‘their’ represents stakeholders.

5.1. Theoretical Implications, Page 25, paragraph 3:

In contrast to works that examine projects from a fairness or justice theory perspective (e.g., Kadefors, 2005; Loosemore & Lim, 2015; Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019; Zhang et al., 2017), our findings suggest that the perception of fairness is shaped by stakeholders’ experiences and observations from three different levels: 1) the outcome shared with them and initiated by the organization with an intention of fairness at the corporate level (distributive fairness); 2) the process of decision-making discussed with them at the project level (procedural fairness); and finally 3) the overall quality of treatment provided to individuals from the project’s authority figures (interactional fairness). Through the application of this dichotomy, we reinforce the point that for managerial practices to be effective they need to actively influence all three aspects of fairness (Lim & Loosemore, 2017).

Though the author(s) claimed that above findings, the paper has no section for findings. One of the most serious problems of this paper is that its conclusion is not based on data and evidences.

Page 30, paragraph 2 under section: ‘6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research’, the author(s) indicated that the role of communication as a mediator between an organization’s behavior and stakeholders’ attributional processes and subsequent perceptions of fairness.

But, acceptable methodology was not followed to reach into such conclusion. Besides, the claim was not supported by evidences.

Page 30, paragraph 2 under section: ‘6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research’, the author(s) indicated that the role of communication as a mediator between an organization’s behavior and stakeholders’ attributional processes and subsequent perceptions of fairness.

For the same reason mentioned above, the paper does not have a methodology section as well.

Specifically, conceptual papers typically do not have methodology section. A few examples among many others from both project management and mainstream management literature include: Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011; Crane and Ruebottom, 2012; Cropanzano, 2009; Driscoll and Statik, 2004; Dunham et al.,
In general, conceptual and theoretical manuscripts do not have methodology sections. There is no argument being made that the broad scope of a body of literature has been explored and new findings are emerging from an analysis” (Callan, 2010, p.302).

In this conceptual paper we tried to use theory and concepts to construct our arguments on how we have arrived at this problem. We have selectively chosen key pieces of literature (including seminal works) that support a particular perspective that we are putting forth for consideration.

Thanks for this observation. Like any conceptual paper, our work aims to build upon seminal works and core principles of the theory, which is why some references may be dated. Our approach involves progressing from these foundational elements to the latest thinking in the investigated domains. New and most up to date reference have been added.

In this instance, we respectfully disagree with the reviewer, as our paper adheres strictly to mainstream management approaches for developing and presenting conceptual work. This, of course, contrasts with an empirical study in terms of how results and findings are collected, analyzed, and presented.

With that said, we express our gratitude once again to the anonymous reviewer for dedicating time and effort to provide guidance for improving this article. Your insights have been invaluable in achieving the expected quality required by IJMPB, and we sincerely hope that the reviewers concur.
encouraged, we should not compromise standard procedures and acceptable methods in a given field of study. In this regard, the present study has no clear research design. Overall, the result section is a mere literature review which does not qualify for result/findings section.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:

1. Though the paper attempts to address the local community's perception of fairness regarding decision-making in a project context—which gets a marginal attention in project management literature—it lacks to provide new and significant information.

2. The paper contains relevant literature. But, the author(s) ignored the following significant works in the field:


In terms of concept wise, the author(s) failed to link fairness with the construct of organizational governance, which can provide the required rigour and theoretical underpinning to generate relevant insights (Unterhitzenberger & Moeller, 2021).

1. Thank you for your valuable feedback. We have endeavoured to enhance the clarity of the paper’s discussion and contributions to emphasize the novelty of our article.

2. We have incorporated the most recent relevant works, as suggested. We appreciate your guidance. While fairness is intricately linked with governance, our focus in this article is solely on stakeholders' perceptions. Future research could delve into how attribution processes are connected to project governance.

3, 4, 5. We appreciate your suggestions. This paper takes a conceptual approach as the concepts of stakeholder attribution and perceptions of fairness are relatively novel in project management studies. The discussions in this paper lay the groundwork for future empirical studies.

6. We sincerely thank you for your patience in reviewing the earlier version of the paper. The manuscript has undergone professional English editing, and we believe all English-related issues have been addressed in this revised version.
3. The paper has no clear research design except that a conceptual approach was followed. A mere conceptual design is not acceptable for the study topics or issues where there is adequate theoretical and empirical literature. This true for fairness in project or project governance and project stakeholder management—the central ideas of the paper.

   Overall, the author(s) did not follow appropriate and standard methodology to undertake the study. Though flexible and innovative methods in research are encouraged, we should not compromise standard procedures and acceptable methods in a given study. In this regard, the present study has no clear research design. The best option could be (1) to do a systematic review or (2) to apply ‘Meta-Analysis Design’

4. Overall, the result section is a mere literature review which does not qualify for result/findings section. One of the most serious problems of the paper is that its conclusion is not based on data and evidences

5. The paper attempts to address the existing limitations in the conventional project stakeholder management which presumes organizational-centric approach. It highlights the importance of local community (secondary stakeholder) participation and involvement in project decision-making. The paper, however, has no data and clear findings that justify the stated implications.

6. Concerning quality of communication, the flow of ideas and the sentence structure are fine. But, the paper further requires proofreading to improve its readability.
I found the paper insightful and interesting to read; thank you.

We thank again the reviewer for the time spent reviewing this manuscript. We appreciate the reviewer’s comments and have taken them seriously in this version of the manuscript. We believe that the updated article has improved and hope that it will match the standard expected by the reviewer.

While stakeholders' literature is relatively rich, the paper does contain new and significant information by establishing the conceptual framework for the existing literature and practices that conceptualize the process through which stakeholders attempt to make sense of an organization’s behavior.

In addition, a process model was developed to lead practitioners towards an inclusive and normative approach aimed at enhancing stakeholders' perception of fairness at the corporate, project, and individual levels.

Thank you. We really appreciate this comment.

The paper presents an adequate understanding of the relevant literature. However, the literature review does not include anything between 2021-2023. The authors are recommended to elaborate on any relevant recent literature.

Thank you for your feedback on the citations. In response to your comments and those of the other reviewer, we have included additional citations that are not only more recent but also more relevant to the paper.

Regarding your suggestion about empirical examples, it’s important to note that this paper is conceptual in nature. While empirical examples could enhance the understanding of the paper, the nature of a conceptual paper limits the expansion of such cases. Our primary goal aligns with the idea of "bridging existing theories in interesting ways, linking works across disciplines, providing multi-level insights, and broadening the scope of our thinking" (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015). As Jaakkola (2020) points out, conceptual papers are not devoid of empirical insights; instead, they are constructed upon theories and concepts validated through existing literature.

While we acknowledge the significance of project manager competencies in shaping stakeholder attribution, addressing this aspect would necessitate a shift in the article’s direction and potentially involve the use of other theories.
Therefore, we have chosen not to explore this dimension in the current article. However, we believe and suggest that future research could delve into this important and intriguing subject.

As Callan (2010, p.302) states: “In general, conceptual and theoretical manuscripts do not have methodology sections. There is no argument being made that the broad scope of a body of literature has been explored and new findings are emerging from an analysis”.

The results and discussion are clearly analyzed and presented. I found both the conceptual framework in Figure 1 and the process model in Figure 2 interesting and well-presented.

Thank you so much for your point. As mentioned above, our paper is a conceptual paper and so rather than drawing on or testing empirical evidences, it is based on theoretical discussions embedded in extant literature. In such type of articles, it is not common or value-adding to have a methodology and findings section, since the discussions are built over the paper through logical arguments.

The recommendations for future researchers can be more specific about the industrial context and the project nature to be investigated.

Yes, the paper does present implications for practice and research. The authors discussed the limitations of the study and findings and how this may impact the outcome of the investigation as well as its implications. I believe that industry practitioners will find the research findings practical and helpful.

The paper is clear; proofreading is advised for the revised manuscript.

Thank you so much for reviewing this article and providing suggestions.

Reviewer 3

The title of the article sparked my interest in reviewing it. There is no doubt that you are addressing a very important issue in construction project management. However, I feel that your
A manuscript has some serious weaknesses. Assuming the role of a reviewer, I will now focus on these "negative" aspects.

Reviewing the manuscript, I will now focus on these "negative" aspects. We believe that the updated manuscript has been improved considerably and hope that the reviewer will agree.

In the Introduction, on page 3, paragraph starting from line 20 sounds moral stance of stakeholder literature rather than normative? Please read the literature focused on moral connotation to stakeholder engagement! And benefits should be considered and how their model can contribute to better quantify such costs and benefits.

Normative stance of stakeholder theory is indeed the moral stance of how an entity ought to behave with its stakeholders. Based on your comments and comments of other reviewers, we have revised the entire manuscript to provide more clarity on the key constructs this paper takes forward for analysis.

On page 5, line 13, there is lack of clarity in the sentence "stakeholder literature in other disciplines...". Please clarify which disciplines?

Overall, the Introduction section is too long (5 pages), and the aim of the study is not clear. Furthermore, the research question is not completely aligned with the title of the article! For instance, the title directs towards stakeholder engagement literature, but research question directs towards organizational behavior!!! The introduction has problem formulation issues, there is indication towards multiple research gaps and related theoretical concepts but none of them is focused upon.

Thank you for your comment. We have revised the English writing to address all your concerns regarding tone and grammar. Additionally, we have broken down complex sentences to make them simpler and more easily understandable.

The title of the manuscript has been modified to align it with the research question. In response to your suggestion, we have also focused the introduction more on the research question.

It is important to write the Introduction in a form of a logical funnel, where more general aspects are told first and sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, then the text should proceed onto narrower details. The aim or purpose of the article is expressed last by describing the research problem and posing the related research questions. Subsequently, it should also briefly describe the research methodology adopted to answer the research questions.

We made introduction more focused on research question as you suggested.

A serious shortcoming of both the Abstract and Introduction sections is that they lack information concerning the research approach and methodology adopted for this study. Furthermore, there is no Methodology section in the entire article. Additionally, the author(s) did not adhere to the structural abstract requirement.
There are many writing guides available that provide advice on the structure of proposed articles. One example is the commonly known IMRAD (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion) structure. Please follow this structure and rewrite the entire article accordingly.

Our primary goal aligns with the idea of "bridging existing theories in interesting ways, linking works across disciplines, providing multi-level insights, and broadening the scope of our thinking" (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015). As Jaakkola (2020) points out, conceptual papers are not devoid of empirical insights; instead, they are constructed upon theories and concepts validated through existing literature.

Specifically, conceptual papers typically do not have methodology section. A few examples among many others from both project management and mainstream management literature include: Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011; Crane and Ruebottom, 2012; Cropanzano, 2009; Driscoll and Statik, 2004; Dunham et al., 2006; Eskerod et al., 2015; Flyvbjerg et al., 2009; Frooman, 1999; Hart and Sharma, 2004; McVea and Freeman, 2005; Rowley, 1997; Sanderson, 2011; Soderlund, 2004; Sutton and Staw, 1995).

“In general, conceptual and theoretical manuscripts do not have methodology sections. There is no argument being made that the broad scope of a body of literature has been explored and new findings are emerging from an analysis” (Callan, 2010, p.302).

In this conceptual paper we tried to use theory and concepts to construct our arguments on how we have arrived at this problem. We have selectively chosen key pieces of literature (including seminal works) that support a particular perspective that we are putting forth for consideration.

In this instance, we respectfully disagree with the reviewer, as our paper adheres strictly to IJMPB and mainstream management approaches for developing and presenting conceptual work. This, of course, contrasts with an empirical study in terms of how results and findings are collected, analyzed, and presented.
I would rather stop my review here and ask you to consider the above comments, as these will/should probably result in more or less updating the remaining sections!

I hope that these, quite critical (sorry!), remarks are of help to you when revising your manuscript for potential publication in this journal.

We are grateful for these concluding comments about the entire manuscript. Having revised the paper extensively, we hope that many points that might have confused the reviewer have been clarified. We also hope that a meticulous review process has made our intended contribution clear and has improved the quality of the manuscript.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:

1. Although, the topic of human perceptions in engaging stakeholders is an interesting issue but as the article currently stands, it is hard to see a substantive original contribution due to not following a scientific writing structure.

2. The paper lacks the review of the stakeholder engagement literature that is directly related to the research phenomenon.

3. Not really, there is no Methodology section in the entire article.

4. There is no specific Results Section in the article.

5. Yes, the paper does present implications for practice, but I am unsure about the reliability of this Section due to the other serious weaknesses – described below – in the paper.

6. The quality of communication is weak because of not following a standard scientific structure of academic writing.

1. Thank you for your valuable feedback. We have endeavoured to enhance the clarity of the paper’s discussion and contributions to emphasize the novelty of our article.

2. We have incorporated the most recent relevant works, as suggested. We appreciate your guidance. Our work clearly highlights how both fairness and attribution processes are inherently integral to stakeholder engagement. However, the primary focus and contribution of this paper lie in understanding stakeholders’ perceptions.

3. 4, 5. We appreciate your suggestions. This paper takes a conceptual approach as the concepts of stakeholder attribution and perceptions of fairness are relatively novel in project management studies. The discussions in this paper lay the groundwork for future empirical studies.

6. We sincerely thank you for your patience in reviewing the earlier version of the paper. The manuscript has undergone professional English editing, and we believe all English-related issues have been addressed in this revised version.
Dear Prof. Nathalie Drouin

Thank you for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript. My co-author and I are pleased to learn that Reviewer 2 recommended only minor changes. We acknowledge the reservations expressed by Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 3, particularly their concerns about the absence of a methodology chapter and engagement with the most updated literature.

In response to the reviewers’ feedback, we have worked hard to address their concerns, making revisions that we believe directly add value to our conceptual paper. Taking their comments seriously, we hope they will recognize the improvements we have made. The effort exerted in this new revision aims to enhance the manuscript’s ability to bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link works across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking regarding stakeholders’ perception of the organization through an attribution and fairness perspective.

In this revised version, we have thoroughly addressed all comments made by the reviewers, with specific focus on:

- Better clarification of the novelty of our thinking and its distinction from existing studies on stakeholder perception of fairness. We aim to contribute a different, mainly understudied perspective in the field of project management.
- Building upon seminal works and core principles of the theory, acknowledging that some references may be dated. However, our approach involves progressing from these foundational elements to the latest thinking in the investigated domains, with the addition of new and more up-to-date references.
- Clarification in our response on why a methodological chapter in conceptual papers is not deemed necessary, reinforcing that conceptual papers do not lack empirical insights. Instead, they are constructed upon theories and concepts that have been formulated and validated through literature.
- Enhanced clarity in both the theoretical and practical implication sections, providing a better explanation of the paper’s contribution and proposing a conceptual framework aimed at reducing the level of abstractness in stakeholders’ attributional processes toward the project organization.

We sincerely believe that we have satisfactorily addressed all concerns raised by Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 3, and we respectfully rebut their comments about the methodology. Thank you again for this opportunity to revise, improve, and resubmit our manuscript.

Sincerely,

Francesco Di Maddaloni
University College London (UCL), London (UK)

Roya Derakhshan
Bocconi School of Management, Milan (Italy)