DECODING FAIRNESS: UNVEILING COGNITIVE PROCESSES IN COMPENSATION AND CAREER GROWTH DECISIONS

ADOPTING ATTRIBUTION THEORY PERSPECTIVE THROUGH LATENT TRANSITION ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of employees' attribution profiles regarding salary increases and promotions on their attitudes and behaviors, using attribution theory. A survey at a large Italian bank applied latent transition analysis to identify five distinct profiles based on ability, seniority, gender identity, social capital, and education background.

Findings show these profiles significantly impact distributive justice and employee outcomes. Attributions to ability are linked to positive perceptions, while gender and social capital attributions relate to perceived unfairness and lower work engagement. Demographic factors, rather than work-related factors, predominantly determine attribution configurations, emphasizing the role of cultural and societal influences.

This longitudinal study also finds that attributional profiles, especially those based on ability, remain stable over six months, even during organizational changes.

***Keywords**: Fairness perception, Attribution theory, Latent transition analysis, Distributive justice, Work engagement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's organizational environments, fairness and justice in compensation and career progression decisions are crucial for effectiveness and employee well-being (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). These factors significantly influence employee engagement, job satisfaction, and performance outcomes (Kaushik & Mukherjee, 2022). Perceptions of fairness are shaped by various determinants, including organizational outcomes, procedural and interactional aspects, and individual cognitive attributes (Bauer, 1999). These perceptions affect work performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intention (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001).

The link between fairness, justice perceptions, and organizational outcomes is rooted in distributive justice and social exchange theories, emphasizing reciprocal contributions between employees and organizations (Cropanzano et al., 2002). However, the cognitive mechanisms underlying these perceptions, particularly in salary increases and career progression, are underexplored. This paper uses attribution theory to examine how individuals interpret organizational events and their reactions (Weiner, 1985; Martinko et al., 2006). Attribution theory posits that causal explanations shape employees' expectations, emotions, and behaviors (King et al., 2021). This study aims to uncover the relationship between organizational events and employee outcomes through attribution theory.

Using a person-centered approach, this study recognizes individuals as holistic entities and acknowledges diversity within the population (Morin et al., 2020). Employing attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) and latent transition analysis (LTA) (Morin et al., 2020), it identifies distinct employee profiles based on attributions in evaluating salary increases and career opportunities, examining profile changes over time.
The study identifies five attributional profiles (ability, seniority, gender identity, social capital, and educational background) that influence perceptions of distributive justice and employee outcomes. It highlights the impact of demographic characteristics, particularly age and gender, on these profiles, considering cultural and societal contexts. This research provides valuable insights for HR practitioners to develop career opportunities enhancing employee well-being.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

2.1 THE PERCEPTION OF FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE CONCERNING SALARY INCREASE AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Equity and distributive justice are closely related concepts. Equity involves exchanging valued resources between actors, while distributive justice focuses on fairness in allocation (Adams, 1965; Niehoff & Moorman, 1993).
Perceptions of distributive justice significantly impact organizations, particularly in outcome allocation. Fairness in salary and advancement decisions relates to work quality and quantity (Walster et al., 1978). Distributive justice influences cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to outcomes, with unjust outcomes evoking negative emotions and actions (Weiss et al., 1999).
Positive distributive justice perceptions link to higher performance, organizational citizenship, job satisfaction, and lower counterproductive behavior and turnover (Adams, 1965; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001).
Fairness in remuneration and career progression is examined through distributive justice and social exchange theories. Distributive justice theory posits that perceived injustice reduces trust and evokes negative responses (Kals & Jiranek, 2012). Social exchange theory suggests that organizational support leads to positive employee behaviors and commitment (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). The cognitive mechanisms behind fairness perceptions need more attention, and attribution theory can help explore these aspects (Martinko et al., 2006)

2.2 ADOPTING ATTRIBUTION THEORY TO IDENTIFY DIFFERENT ATTRIBUTIONAL PROFILES REGARDING SALARY INCREASE AND CAREER PROGRESSION OPPORTUNITIES

Attribution theory, introduced by Fritz Heider (1958), suggests people instinctively seek to explain why events occur to predict future events and control their environment. Heider's concept of perceived causality highlights how attributed causes shape emotional responses and actions. He distinguished between internal (motivation and ability) and external (environmental) causes.
Heider's work was expanded by Weiner (1985). Weiner proposed three dimensions for analyzing causes: locus of causality (internal/external), stability, and controllability. This theory is vital in management, especially for understanding responses to performance evaluations (Martinko et al., 2006) and career opportunities (Sharafizad et al., 2022).
In career promotions and salary increases, attribution theory helps explain satisfaction based on perceived fairness (Sharafizad et al., 2022). Weiner's model posits that

attributing decisions to internal and stable causes (e.g., ability, gender) versus external and unstable factors (e.g., networks) influences responses to these decisions.
A person-centered approach identifies different profiles based on the perceived causes of career decisions, including ability, gender identity, social capital, tenure, and education. This holistic view aligns with trends in organizational research that focus on subgroups within populations rather than just variable relationships (Morin et al., 2020).

Considering all the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Employees are grouped into distinct profiles with varying configurations of individual ability, gender identity, social capital, tenure, and educational background attribution concerning remuneration and career progression.

2.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND THE PERCEPTION OF FAIRNESS

The perception of fairness is influenced by several factors, including organizational outcomes, practices (procedures and interactions), and the characteristics of the perceiver (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, education, and tenure can significantly impact justice perceptions regarding remuneration and career progression (Kulik et al., 1996). For example, Weiner's classification suggests that achievement or failure explanations vary by gender due to sex-role orientations (Weiner, 1985). Although demographic characteristics, mainly gender and race, influence fairness perceptions, their relationship with distributive justice is underexplored (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001).
Programs raising race awareness might be perceived differently by different races (Truxillo & Bauer, 1999). Gender identity can influence equity rule perceptions (Leventhal & Lane, 1970). Not all demographic group members share the same perceptions about remuneration and career progression (Bauer, 1999). Males often focus on protecting their interests in reward allocation, while females react differently to distributive justice (Major & Adams, 1983).
Fairness perception is important as it enhances self-esteem, showing individuals as valuable group members (Tyler & Degoey, 1996). Self-esteem can vary over time, with demographic factors like age or tenure indirectly influencing justice perception (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Attribution theory indicates that perceived unfairness can boost self-esteem by attributing negative outcomes to unjust procedures rather than personal failings (Schroth & Pradhan Shah, 2000).
Considering all the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, educational level, and tenure) influence the composition of the different attributional profiles concerning compensation and career progression opportunities.

2.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERCEPTION OF FAIRNESS AND EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES AND ATTITUDES

Perceived control over career decision-making is closely linked to mature career development attitudes (Taylor, 1982). Control perceptions correlate positively with work satisfaction, motivation, performance, and job tenure (Spector, 1988). An attributional style indicating strong control over career decisions predicts career planning, exploration behavior (Trice et al., 1989), career decisiveness (Fretz et al., 1994), and career

commitment (Colarelli & Bishop, 1990). While research has focused mainly on the controllability dimension, the locus of causality and stability dimensions also play a role in career development.
Hutri (1995) found that individuals facing occupational crises emphasize external, stable attributions for setbacks, while those not in crisis attribute outcomes to internal, unstable factors like effort. Martinko et al. (2006) explored common attributions like "effort" and "ability." Attributes perceived as unstable, controllable, and internal are linked to positive perceptions, leading to acceptance of management decisions (Russen et al., 2021). This belief in fair promotions or pay increases supports perceptions of distributive justice and fairness, positively influencing job satisfaction (Foley et al., 2005), performance (Ramos et al., 2022), engagement (Aggarwal et al., 2022), and organizational commitment (Dongrey & Rokade, 2022).
Equity theory suggests that fair treatment by organizations fosters employee commitment and a sense of obligation. Wage differentials and discriminatory practices in career advancement, like pay and promotions, are prevalent forms of workplace discrimination (Palumbo & Manna, 2020). These discriminations are associated with affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Perceived gender discrimination increases perceptions of organizational injustice among both male and female employees (Ramos et al., 2022).

Considering all the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Employees whose profiles are primarily dominated by stable, controllable, and internal attributions exhibit the highest levels of perceived distributive justice, work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

3. METHOD

3.1 PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

The research was conducted in an Italian bank, distributing a survey to all employees. Participants were assured of the study's anonymity. The organization provided data on employee compensation, job position, and socio-demographic information.
The sample, consisting of respondents who participated in the survey at both time points, comprised 1,019 individuals, including 286 women and 733 men, with an average age of 45.52 years. The vast majority were full-time workers (96%) and with a master’s degree (58%).

3.2 MEASURES

All items included in the questionnaire assess the variables through a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), except work engagement – ranging from "never" (1) to "every day" (7). All respondents answered the same questionnaire.
Attributions: Leveraging on Weiner’s (1985) work, we developed a scale to measure employee attributions for decisions on salary increases and promotions. The scale followed the measurement procedures outlined by Martinko et al. (2006), which involve evaluating explanations for an event on a Likert scale. We included items focusing on different specific on attributions, namely ability, gender identity, social capital (networking), educational background, and seniority. This ad hoc scale was tested and validated, and the factor analysis supported a five-factor structure.

Distributive Justice: Distributive Justice was assessed through a scale from Niehoff & Moorman (1993).
Work Engagement: To measure Work Engagement, we used the UWES–9S developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006).
Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC): We measured AOC using the scale introduced by Allen and Meyer (1990), which investigates attachment and emotional involvement with an organization.
Management Trust: We measured Management Trust using the scale developed by Gould-Williams & Davies (2005).
Covariates: Contextual factors that presumably influence employee attribution were incorporated into our study as covariates, which were tested to determine whether they predicted each individual's attribution profile and the shift over time between profiles. These predictors are demographic characteristics, i.e., gender, age, and educational level; and some work-related factors, i.e., job weight, employee performance level, hours of learning and training, and the level of gender pay gap in the role.

3.3 STATISTICAL ANALYSES

First, we developed and validated a new attribution scale with the aim of understanding employees' attributions regarding salary increases and promotions through attributional dimensions related to fairness and justice. We worked closely with the HR function and experts of the studied company, especially in the early stages. Next, we conducted all validation tests and tests of dimensionality reliability and validity. After developing the scale, we identified the profiles and their evolution over time using the person-centered technique of Latent Transition Analysis (LTA). We followed the steps recommended in the literature (Morin et al., 2020) determining the number of profiles and their meaning, estimating the transition probabilities, and the impact of the covariates impact on them. Finally, we analyzed the employees' outcomes in relation to the profiles.

4. RESULTS

4.1 DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF A MERIT ATTRIBUTION SCALE

Regarding the development and validation of the scale, the results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) are presented in Table 1 with factor loadings above 0.4, indicating that all items loaded on a single factor with no cross-loadings exceeding 0.3.

Table 1. Results of EFA

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Attribution to Educational Background	In my organization, promotion and career advancement occur because a person possesses a specific educational qualification.	0.5333	0.8631
	In my organization, salary increase occurs because a person possesses a specific educational qualification.	0.5069	
Attribution to Social Capital (Network)	In my organization, promotion and career advancement occur because a person has built a strong network of contacts within the organization.	0.5753	0.8803
	In my organization, salary increase occurs because a person has built a strong network of contacts within the organization.	0.5779	
Attribution to Gender	In my organization, promotion and career advancement occur because a person belongs	0.6817	0.9216

	to a specific gender identity (male, female, other).		
	In my organization, salary increase occurs because a person belongs to a specific gender identity (male, female, other).	0.6683	
Attribution to Ability	In my organization, promotion and career advancement occur because a person demonstrates their abilities.	0.6517	0.8810
	In my organization, salary increase occurs because a person demonstrates their abilities.	0.6925	
Attribution to Seniority	In my organization, promotion and career advancement of individuals occur as they gain seniority over time.	0.7013	0.8516
	In my organization, salary increase occurs as individuals gain seniority over time.	0.6925	

After testing the dimensionality, the five-factor model was retained as it demonstrated an excellent fit of the data (CFI = 0.976; TLI = 0.956) and excellent model fit (SRMR = 0.025). Measurement invariance tests confirmed that the scale is invariant over time, both at T1 and at T2.

4.2 IDENTIFICATION OF THE NUMBER OF PROFILES

We identified the number of profiles using Latent Profile Analysis, considering statistical fit parameters. In Table 2, the statistics allowed us to retain five profiles, particularly based on the BIC statistic, which is considered a robust indicator of model fit, as shown in the Elbow plot in Figure 1. The LMR also confirms the choice of 5 profiles, as seen in Table 5. Although the entropy is not the highest, it has a value considered excellent, as 0.70 is often used as a cut-off.

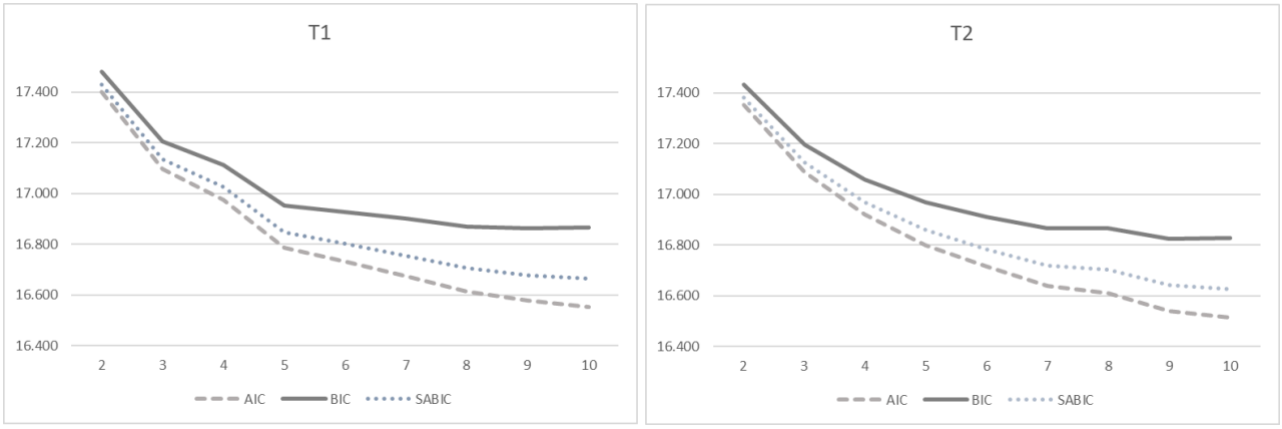
Table 2. Fit indices and number of profiles for T1 and T2

# of profiles	LL	AIC	BIC	SABIC	Smallest class (%)	Entropy	LMR(p)
Time 1							
2	-8685.067	17402.133	17480.959	17430.141	0.32287	0.834	0.0000
3	-8526.601	17097.202	17205.586	17135.712	0.21884	0.732	0.0000
4	-8460.086	16976.173	17114.117	17025.186	0.11089	0.757	0.0006
5	**-8359.193**	**16786.387**	**16953.890**	**16845.903**	**0.07066**	**0.778**	**0.0000**
6	-8325.760	16731.521	16928.584	16801.540	0.01963	0.794	0.1255
7	-8291.144	16674.288	16900.910	16754.810	0.02453	0.767	0.0868
Time 2							
2	-8660.262	17352.525	17431.350	17380.533	0.35623	0.816	0.0000
3	-8521.268	17086.536	17194.920	17125.046	0.24239	0.714	0.0055
4	-8431.410	16918.820	17056.764	16967.834	0.10991	0.834	0.0000
5	**-8365.659**	**16799.318**	**16966.821**	**16858.834**	**0.11482**	**0.776**	**0.0006**
6	-8317.017	16714.034	16911.097	16784.053	0.03435	0.809	0.0561

7	-8273.060	16638.121	16864.743	16718.643	0.02552	0.833	0.0616

Note. Bold font indicates selected models. LL, log likelihood; AIC, Akaike information criteria; BIC, Bayesian information criteria; SABIC, sample-size adjusted BIC; LMR(p), value of p for the Lo et al. (2001) test.

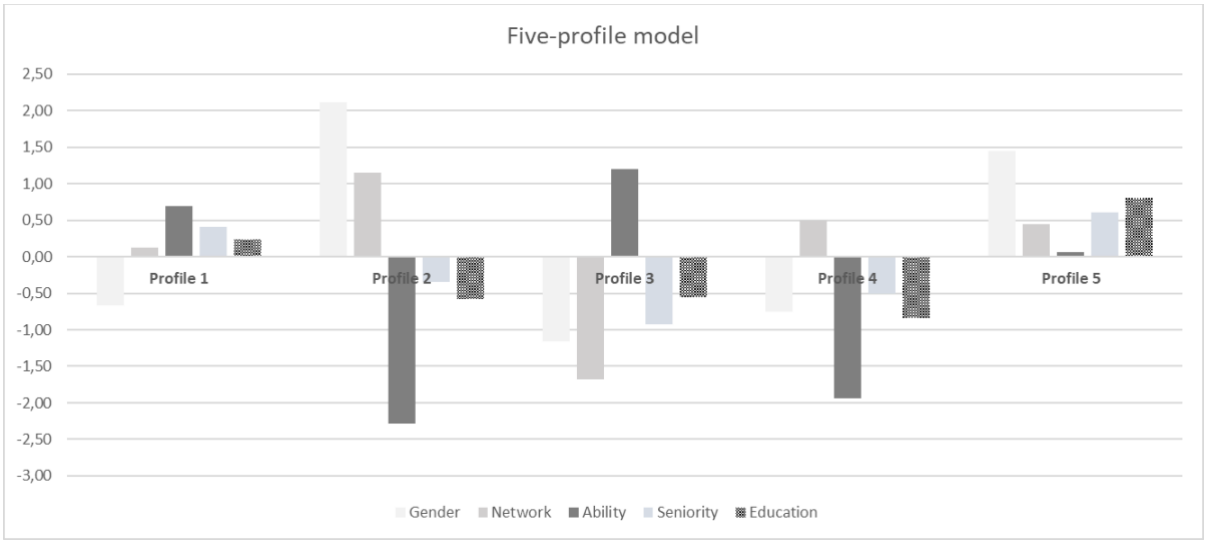
Figure 1. Elbow plot for BIC and AIC in determining profile solution



4.3 DEFINITION OF QUALITATIVE DISTINCT PROFILES

We conducted LTA with 5 profiles and labelled the emerged profiles based on variable probabilities to identify qualitatively distinct profiles. We examined the high/low levels below or above the mean (Spurk et al., 2020). Looking at Figure 2, we can label the first profile as "Ability & Seniority Dominated," the second as "Gender & Network Dominated," the third as "Ability Dominated," the fourth as "Network Dominated," and the fifth as "Multiple Factors Dominated." The dimensions of the profiles at Time 1 and Time 2 based on the estimated model are reported in Table 3.

Figure 2. Five-profile LTA model



Note. Profile means vs means across profiles for the attribution to indicators.

Table 3. Profiles dimensions at Time 1 and Time 2

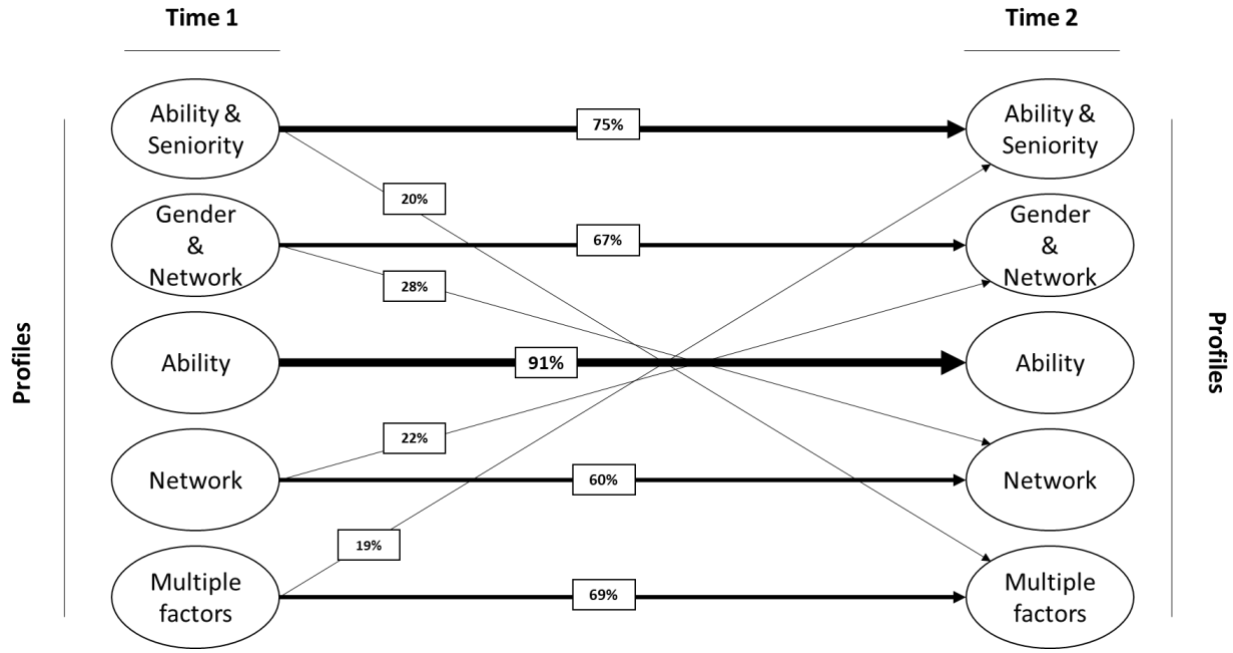
Profile	#	%
Time 1		
1	336	32,95%
2	72	7,05%
3	205	20,11%
4	151	14,85%
5	255	25,04%
Time 2		
1	328	32,22%
2	107	10,52%
3	192	18,83%
4	139	13,60%
5	253	24,83%

Note. N = 1,019.

4.4 ESTIMATION OF STATUS PREVALENCE AND TRANSITION PROBABILITIES

Figure 3 visually represents the transition paths and prevalence of profiles transitioning from T1 to T2. Thicker lines in the figure indicate higher transition probabilities and prevalence. It is worth noting that the profiles demonstrate a significant level of stability, with the ability dominated profile being the most stable. When examining the highest transition probabilities, they mainly occur towards Profile 5, which incorporates multiple dimensions in its attributions, or among profiles with similar attributional dimensions, such as locus of causality, stability, and controllability.

Figure 3. Transition paths and prevalence



Note. N = 1,019. Transition path and prevalence based on estimated probabilities. The percentages indicate the number of people transitioning between profiles from T1 to T2 - only transitions above 10% are shown.

4.5 COVARIATES

Table 4 presents the results of a multinomial logistic regression analysis that predicts attribution profiles (considered at time 1, T1) based on various factors considered as covariates, including individual characteristics and work-related factors. The table displays the odds ratios, with statistically significant values highlighted in bold. Additionally, the factors are presented in order of their significance in determining the attribution profiles. This immediately indicates that the most influential factors in shaping the attribution profiles are seniority, age, job weight, and performance (although it should be noted that performance is statistically significant only when referring to the Gender & Network profile). Age and gender pay gap have a lesser impact. Individual pay and education are rarely statistically significant.

In general, we can conclude that higher seniority increases the likelihood of belonging to the Ability profile. Being female significantly increases the chances of being part of the Gender & Network profile and, to a lesser extent, the Multiple Factors profile. Having a job with a higher job weight greatly increases the likelihood of belonging to the Ability profile. As mentioned earlier, performance is only significant when it relates to the Gender & Network profile. In general, an increase in the assigned performance level, as determined by the performance management process, greatly increases the chances of belonging to all other profiles compared to the reference group, Gender & Network, and may even decrease the likelihood of belonging to that group. Higher age slightly increases the chances of belonging to the Gender & Network and Multiple Factors profiles. A larger gender pay gap increases the likelihood of belonging to the Ability & Seniority profile.

Use the “CINet Heading 2” style for level-2 headings. If you use this style for your level-2 headings, the heading numbers are automatically generated and maintained for you.

Table 4. Predictors of the T1 Five-Profile Model - odds ratios

Covariates	Multinomial logistic regression									
	Group 1 as the reference				Group 2 as the reference			Group 3 as the reference		Group 4 as the reference
	Group 2 OR	Group 3 OR	Group 4 OR	Group 5 OR	Group 3 OR	Group 4 OR	Group 5 OR	Group 4 OR	Group 5 OR	Group 5 OR
Seniority	**1,040***	**1,080***	**1,027***	1,018	**1,038***	0,988	0,979	**0,951***	**0,943***	0,991
Gender	**2,329***	1,441	0,984	**3,517***	0,619	**0,422***	0,510	0,683	**2,440***	**3,574***
Job weight	0,970	**1,076***	0,967	0,965	**1,110***	0,998	0,995	**0,899***	**0,897***	0,998
Performance	**0,533***	1,164	0,868	0,790	**2,184***	**1,629***	**1,482***	0,746	0,679	0,910
Age	**1,045***	1,031	1,024	**1,043***	0,987	0,980	0,998	0,993	1,011	1,018
Gender Pay Gap	0,956	**0,901***	**0,928***	0,934	0,943	0,971	0,977	1,030	1,036	1,006
Pay	0,977	0,960	1,003	1,045	0,983	1,027	1,070	1,044	**1,088***	1,042
Education	1,103	1,001	1,144	0,989	0,908	1,038	0,897	1,143	0,988	0,864

Note: Multinomial logistic regression across latent classes for covariates.

*p <.05

4.6 OUTCOMES

Regarding the outcomes, we can refer to Figure 4. The profiles that attribute the most to the dimension closely associated with positive perceptions and responses in the literature, specifically the ability dimension characterized as internal, unstable, and controllable, exhibit the highest values in the employees' outcomes (Profile 3 and 1). Following this, Profile 5, which considers a mix of factors without a dominant attribution, ranks next. Conversely, profiles dominated by gender and network, which are attributions associated with external dimensions, have the lowest values in the analyzed employees' outcomes (4 and 2).

In conclusion, we can affirm that the formulated hypotheses are fully accepted.

Figure 4. T2 Outcomes of the Five-Profile Model in T2

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

We have identified five profiles that reflect employees' perceptions of attribution towards salary increase and promotion. These profiles take into account cognitive and subjective processes, specifically attributions, and their impact on predictors and outcomes. It is rare to find strong attributional "polarizations" because the attributive factors considered (ability, seniority, gender identity, social capital, and education background) compete within each profile, resulting in qualitative and quantitative differences. The attributive factors were selected through a process that involved reviewing the literature and collaborating with the HR function of the company to develop a specific attribution scale that would help determine the attributions made by employees regarding promotions and salary increases.

Each profile significantly influences distributive justice and employee outcomes. Positive perceptions and attitudes are associated with attributions of ability, which are seen as controllable, internal, and unstable. On the other hand, attributions of gender and social capital (network) lead to perceptions of unfairness, low distributive justice, and lower work engagement. Gender attributions are in fact considered stable, uncontrollable, and external as they are influenced by societal expectations. Similarly, attributions of social capital that are perceived stable, uncontrollable, and external, as they are seen to depend on the social status to which a person belongs. The attribution of seniority has a more mixed impact, as it can be seen as both an uncontrollable factor unrelated to fairness and justice, and as an internal and unstable factor associated with positive perceptions. Education, on the other hand, seems to be a factor similar to ability, linked to positive perceptions, but less influential as seen from the results.

The identified profiles are primarily influenced by demographic characteristics. While the actual gender pay gap does not directly influence the attribution configurations, as they are primarily determined by demographic factors and individual beliefs. Gender and age have an impact, with age also affecting the transition probabilities. This means that as individuals grow older, their propensity to move towards profiles dominated by the attribution of ability decreases, and they are more likely to remain in profiles dominated by the attribution of gender, perceiving workplace discrimination.

These findings suggest that cultural and societal factors continue to shape individuals' attributions, despite organizational efforts to promote equity and inclusion. Individuals' attributions reflect their perception of the social, political, economic, and structural context, influencing their perceptions of distributive justice, organizational support, and well-being. This reinforces the notion of stable attributional profiles that remain consistent even during organizational transformations. Indeed, it is important to note that the profiles are generally not subject to significant changes over time, and any variations that occur mostly happen between profiles dominated by similar attributional dimensions, i.e., in terms of controllability, causality, and stability.

5.2 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study offers valuable insights for managers, HR professionals, and organizations. It emphasizes the significance of considering employees' attributional processes, which influence their responses to management decisions. The study reveals the impact of socio-cultural factors on individual perceptions, such as gender discrimination perception influenced by the wider context. Creating a perception of fairness and non-discrimination among employees is crucial, requiring efforts beyond achieving gender equity in pay and roles. Tailored communication strategies and policies for distinct employee prototypes can address diverse behaviors in perceiving events like promotions and pay raises. Interventions targeting mediating and cognitive processes, such as attribution profiles and distributive justice, can effectively mitigate the impact of gender discrimination.

5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Our study has limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, our focus on individual attributions limits the understanding of gender discrimination to individual perceptions, neglecting other important factors. Secondly, the study's sample is limited to the banking sector, which may restrict the generalizability of our findings to other sectors and occupational groups.

Another limitation is the use of self-reported data, which may introduce biases and raise concerns about common method variance. Although we employed techniques to minimize these issues, it is important to acknowledge the potential limitations associated with self-reported measures. Despite these limitations, our study provides valuable insights into the role of attributions in understanding perceptions of justice and fairness. Future research should address these limitations to further advance our understanding of this complex issue.

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