

Supervisor-Subordinate Similarity: Types, Effects, and Mechanisms

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Three types of supervisor-subordinate similarity were identified: (a) *perceived similarity*, perceptions of how similar the supervisor and subordinate are; (b) *perceptual congruence*, similarity of perceptions about behaviors important in receiving a high merit pay raise; and (c) *actual similarity* of individual characteristics. The relation(s) among the types of similarity and of each type with various employee outcomes were examined. Results supported the distinctions among types. Each type was related to subordinate performance. Results were less consistent for job satisfaction and pay ratings. Perceived similarity yielded the strongest relation with the dependent variables. The findings also suggest that similarity affects evaluations not only through bias, but also partly because of differences in supervisor-subordinate interactions.

Numerous studies have identified factors that affect performance ratings. One such factor is supervisor-subordinate similarity (Landy & Farr, 1980). The present study explores possible effects of three types of similarity: (a) perceived similarity between the evaluator and another person, (b) similarity of supervisor and subordinate perceptions about aspects of the work environment, and (c) actual or demographic similarity.

In research on *perceived similarity* it has generally been assumed that a person who is perceived as similar to the evaluator is more attractive, so that decisions and evaluations regarding that person are biased positively (Byrne, 1961; Byrne, Young, & Griffitt, 1966). Experimental manipulations of similarity have generally supported this assumption. Persons seen as similar in attitudes and background were treated and evaluated more favorably than were those seen as dissimilar (Baskett, 1973; Gollightly, Huffman, & Byrne, 1972; Griffitt & Jackson, 1970; Peters & Terborg, 1975; Rand & Wexley, 1975; Wexley & Nemeroff, 1974). However, studies conducted in the field suggested that the biasing effects of similarity might be less robust and more subject to individual differences than the aforementioned results indicate. Pulakos and Wexley (1983) found that perceived similarity between managers and their subordinates led both to give higher performance ratings to the other, but studies involving college and job-applicant interviews found sizable individual differences in the effects of perceived similarity (Frank & Hackman, 1975; Sydiah, 1962). Finally, Dalessio and Imada (1984) found that the decision made by most interviewers re-

flected the applicant's match with an ideal candidate more than it did his or her perceived similarity with the interviewer.

Some of this disparity between field and laboratory findings may reflect the inadvertent manipulation of both similarity and social acceptability. If subjects responded to attitude items with socially acceptable responses, creating dissimilar profiles might have produced applicants with socially unacceptable responses. In any case, the biasing influences of perceived similarity on decision making and evaluation appear to differ across individuals and situations.

The second type of similarity, *perceptual congruence*, reflects the similarity of perceptions held by supervisors and subordinates. Wexley, Alexander, Greenwalt, and Couch (1980) created three similarity measures: (a) subordinate perceptual congruence was the difference between the subordinate's description of the manager and the manager's self-description, (b) manager perceptual congruence was the difference between the manager's description of the subordinate and the subordinate's self-description, and (c) actual similarity was the difference between their self-descriptions. Subordinate congruence was positively related to subordinate job satisfaction. Managerial congruence was positively related to the manager's rating of subordinate performance. Actual similarity was unrelated to either variable. Finally, subordinate congruence was positively related to the subordinate's appraisal of managerial performance (Wexley & Pulakos, 1983). In other studies, perceptual congruence concerning the demands of the subordinate's role was positively related to subordinate job satisfaction and to supervisor ratings of subordinate performance (Bernardin, 1979; Greene, 1972), whereas congruence about the frequency of communication was related to satisfaction (Hatfield & Huseman, 1982).

In sum, congruence of supervisor and subordinate perceptions of the demands and characteristics of the work environment was linked to greater subordinate satisfaction and higher performance ratings. Perceiving the environment congruently may be rewarding in itself, but also seems to allow the subordinate to better anticipate what will be rewarded by the supervisor, and to behave accordingly (Greene, 1972; Wexley et al., 1980).

The third type of similarity, *actual similarity*, reflects influ-

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ences of actual (rather than perceived) similarities in attributes, characteristics, or background. For example, use of similar categorizations for jobs and people, similarity in the way concepts were associated with other concepts, and similarity in the dimensions used to examine and communicate events were related to communication effectiveness and liking for the other person (Triandis, 1959, 1960). In addition, similarity of attitudes and values resulted in higher evaluations of subordinate performance (Miles, 1964; Senger, 1971). Hamner, Kim, Baird, and Bigoness (1974) found that students gave higher performance ratings to applicants of the same race; Schmidt and Lappin (1980) found that student ratings of the performance of members of their own race had more variance. However, Bigoness (1976) reported that White raters did not rate Blacks and Whites differently, and studies of nonmanagerial, managerial, and non-professional employees (Cleveland & Landy, 1981; Mobley, 1982; Wexley & Pulakos, 1983) found no evidence that supervisors gave higher ratings to employees of similar race, age, or sex.

In sum, cognitive and value similarity were related to subordinate performance ratings. Attitude and demographic similarity yielded mixed results, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the effects of actual similarity or the mechanisms by which actual similarity affects evaluation. Actual similarity may affect performance ratings via perceived similarity, by allowing the subordinate to be a better performer, or through both mechanisms. If actual similarity leads to perceived similarity, a similar-to-me bias may exist. However, actual similarity may lead to similar perceptions of the work environment that allow the subordinate to reduce uncertainty and role ambiguity and to focus energy on work activities that the supervisor perceives as important, thus improving performance.

The three types of similarity appear conceptually distinct, although underlying mechanisms may overlap. However, no empirical comparison of these similarity types was found. The present study investigated whether each type accounts for different variance in employee outcomes and, if not, which type might be most influential. Second, previous studies have suggested individual differences in susceptibility to similar-to-me effects but have generally not addressed such differences in evaluating subordinate performance. If such differences exist, insight is needed into what distinguishes those who are from those who are not affected.

Method

The measures used in this study were included within a larger questionnaire completed voluntarily by employees in a group during their work shift. Unless otherwise indicated, items reflected agreement with a statement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) or a rating of the frequency of occurrence of an event or behavior (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *almost always*). A high score indicated a greater amount of the variable.

Subjects

The sample of 155 subordinates and 25 supervisors was employed at a rehabilitation center in a large southwestern city. Most of the subjects were nurses (subordinates, $n = 81$; supervisors, $n = 10$); the remainder worked in areas such as physical and occupational therapy (subordinates, $n = 52$; supervisors, $n = 13$) or clerical services (subordinates,

$n = 22$; supervisors, $n = 2$). Approximately 88% of the subordinates and 92% of the supervisors were women. The median age was 33.5 years for subordinates, 34.5 for supervisors. Median tenure was 41 months for subordinates, 90 months for supervisors. Median education was a high school degree for subordinates and a college degree for supervisors. Subordinates were 53% Black, 36% White, and 6% Hispanic; supervisors were 12% Black, 76% White, and 12% Hispanic.

Independent Measures

Perceived similarity. One item (how much like you in outlook, perspective, values, and work habits is this subordinate) assessed the supervisor's perceived similarity to the subordinate. Subordinates rated the extent to which "My supervisor and I see things in much the same way" and "are alike in a number of areas" ($\alpha = .81$). Because these items asked directly how similar the other person was, the measure appeared minimally confounded with social acceptability.

Perceptual congruence. Similarity of perceptions about behaviors instrumental in receiving a merit pay raise was measured by 10 items that asked the importance of various behaviors for receiving the highest possible merit pay raise. Similarity was the sum of squared differences between supervisor and subordinate responses, reversed to indicate profile similarity (Cronbach & Gleser, 1953).

Demographic similarity. Actual similarity was measured in terms of race, educational level, department tenure, and age. Race discrepancy was coded as the same (0) or different (1). Education was coded as (1) no degree, (2) high school diploma, (3) associate degree, (4) bachelors degree, or (5) masters degree or higher. Educational discrepancy was the absolute difference between supervisor and subordinate responses. Department tenure was measured in months; age was measured in years. Tenure and age discrepancy were the absolute differences between the supervisor and subordinate. Discrepancy scores were divided by their respective standard deviations, summed, and then reversed so that larger scores indicated greater similarity. This sample was predominantly women, thus sex was not used to measure similarity.

Dependent Measures

Two items ($\alpha = .74$) measured subordinate satisfaction with the job and the organization. Supervisors rated "the overall level of performance you observe for this person" on a 7-point scale (1 = *performance is very low; well below my expectations for someone in that job* to 7 = *performance substantially exceeds my expectations for someone in that job*). Supervisors also recommended a merit pay raise from 0% to 5% as if they "were making the decision today."

Results

Correlations among the similarity measures, the component scores of similarity, and the dependent variables are shown in Table 1. Each type of similarity was significantly related to subordinate job satisfaction and performance ratings. For pay recommendations, only perceived similarity showed such a relation. The highest correlations were generally found for perceived similarity. Demographic similarity was positively correlated with job performance, although the negative relation with job satisfaction was unexpected. This latter correlation primarily reflected race similarity; subordinates were less satisfied with same-race supervisors than with different-race supervisors.

The use of difference scores raises several questions, including the degree to which relations between such scores and other variables represent something beyond the information con-

Table 1
Correlation Matrix of Similarity Measures, Component Scores, and Dependent Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Perceived similarity																		
1. Subordinate perceived similarity	—																	
2. Supervisor perceived similarity	34*	—																
3. Total perceived similarity	90*	71*	—															
Perceptual congruence																		
4. Subordinate perceptions of instrumentalities	09	08	11	—														
5. Supervisor perceptions of instrumentalities	-03	-09	-06	14	—													
6. Similarity of perceptions	23*	12	23*	65*	07	—												
Demographic similarity																		
7. Subordinate race	27*	03	22*	07	-04	05	—											
8. Subordinate education	28*	24*	32*	11	-06	20*	48*	—										
9. Subordinate tenure	-13	-21*	-19*	03	-04	04	-08	-17*	—									
10. Subordinate age	-10	-06	-10	10	02	10	00	15	57*	—								
11. Supervisor race	25*	21*	29*	-02	-27*	05	22*	18*	10	12	—							
12. Supervisor education	04	20*	13	00	-16*	03	22*	24*	03	02	44*	—						
13. Supervisor tenure	-16	-15	-19*	-10	18*	-11	-02	00	-03	08	08	05	—					
14. Supervisor age	-23*	-18*	-26*	-08	17*	-21*	-05	-13	10	16*	-10	-25*	59*	—				
15. Demographic similarity	13	12	15	05	05	15	23*	44*	-29*	-27*	-28*	-12	-22*	-22*	—			
Outcomes																		
16. Job satisfaction	30*	15	29*	20*	06	18*	-07	-08	27*	24*	11	08	-06	-07	-22*	—		
17. Performance rating	19*	37*	31*	-01	-20*	16*	11	16*	-07	00	05	19*	-11	-25*	22*	06	—	
18. Pay rating	19*	31*	28*	05	-14	10	09	11	-10	-04	-03	11	-14	-22*	12	10	67*	—

Note. Decimal points have been omitted. * $p < .05$.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Comparing Contributions of Similarity and Component Scores for Predicting Job Satisfaction, Performance Ratings, and Pay Recommendations

Predictor set	No. of predictors	Outcome measure (R^2)		
		Satisfaction	Performance	Pay
Perceived similarity				
Subordinate perceptions	1	.088*	.037*	.037*
Subordinate + supervisor perceptions	2	.090*	<u>.141*</u>	<u>.105*</u>
Perceptual congruence				
Subordinate instrumentalities	1	.039*	.000	.002
Subordinate + supervisor instrumentalities	2	.040*	<u>.040*</u>	.025
Subordinate + supervisor instrumentalities + congruence	3	.046	<u>.076*</u>	.029
Demographic similarity				
Subordinate characteristics	6	.165*	.046	.035
Subordinate + supervisor characteristics	11	.188*	.108	.098
Subordinate + supervisor characteristics + similarity	12	.193*	<u>.140*</u>	.103

Note. Underlined values indicate a significant increase of R^2 over previously entered predictors in that set.

* $p < .05$.

tained in the components used to create the scores. Thus, the effects of similarity were analyzed after considering the relation of the component parts with the dependent variables (Johns, 1981; Wall & Payne, 1973; White, Crino, & Hatfield, 1985). These analyses were conducted in two steps. Table 2 shows the additional variance explained when the difference scores were added to their component parts in a set of hierarchical regressions. For perceived similarity, subordinate perceived similarity was the primary correlate of subordinate job satisfaction. Supervisor perceptions of similarity were more strongly related to performance and pay decisions. For perceptual congruence, the similarity of supervisor and subordinate perceptions of instrumentalities added explanatory variance only for the performance ratings. Likewise, demographic similarity predicted performance ratings but not job satisfaction or pay recommendations. Table 3 shows hierarchical regression analyses containing only the similarity scores. These analyses compared the relative contribution of each type of similarity. Each explained unique variance in at least one of the criteria. For job satisfaction, each type contributed uniquely. For performance ratings, both total perceived similarity and demographic similarity contributed unique variance. Finally, for pay ratings, once perceived similarity was entered, other forms of similarity added little variance. Although not conclusive, such findings support suggestions that the different forms of similarity represent somewhat different influences on supervisor-subordinate relationships.

The question about individual differences in reactions to similarity was addressed by creating subgroups of subordinates for each supervisor who evaluated four or more subordinates. A total of 13 supervisors evaluated 127 subordinates; subgroups ranged from 4 to 28 subordinates. Within each group, the supervisor's rating of the subordinate's similarity was correlated with that subordinate's performance and pay ratings. The resulting correlations ranged from .94 to $-.87$ for performance ratings, $\chi^2(12, N = 127) = 19.95, p < .10$, and $.93$ to $-.82$ for pay ratings, $\chi^2(12, N = 127) = 17.47, p < .20$. Although not significant, such variation suggests a strong possibility of individual differences in reactions to similarity.

A final issue concerns mechanisms by which similarity influences evaluation. Some studies argue that bias is the primary mechanism, others suggest that similarity leads to better performance through clearer task perceptions. Therefore, the similarity measures were correlated with subordinate personality characteristics, and subordinate perceptions of role demands, reward, and work climate, and relationships with the supervisor (see Table 4). Previous research generally used total perceived similarity, but supervisor and subordinate perceived similarity were included in these exploratory analyses because of differing relations with the dependent variables. To simplify interpretation, only correlations significant at the $p < .01$ level are presented.

These correlations suggested that subordinates who perceive their supervisors as similar to themselves perceive the work setting differently from those who see their supervisor as dissimilar. Subordinate perceived similarity was related to perceptions of the work and reward climate, supervisor use of punishment and rewards, the relationship with the supervisor, and role clarity. Similarly, subordinates whom the supervisor rated as similar, reported confidence and trust in their supervisor, a good relationship with that supervisor, and little role ambiguity. These results suggest that perceived similarity is linked to increased clarity of role demands and a positive relationship with the supervisor.

The measure of perceptual congruence supported a similar interpretation. This measure was negatively related to role ambiguity, and positively related to subordinate confidence and trust in the supervisor, the perceived influence of the supervisor, the perception of a strong relation between the performance rating and a merit pay raise, and the perception of more frequent use of formal rewards. Furthermore, subordinates whose perceived instrumentalities were similar to the supervisor's felt that their own effort determined the rewards they received and that the organization rewarded the best workers. Finally, similarity was positively related to subordinate self-esteem and professional involvement. Understanding the mechanisms underlying demographic similarity was more difficult, inasmuch as it was

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Comparing Contributions of Different Types of Similarity for Predicting Job Satisfaction, Performance Ratings, and Pay Recommendations

Predictor set	No. of predictors	Outcome measure (R^2)		
		Satisfaction	Performance	Pay
Total perceived similarity + perceptual congruence	2	.098*	.107*	.083*
Total perceived similarity + demographic similarity	2	<u>.156*</u>	<u>.128*</u>	.087*
Perceptual congruence + demographic similarity	2	<u>.095*</u>	.066*	.021
Total perceived similarity + demographic similarity + perceptual congruence	3	<u>.179*</u>	.133*	.088*

Note. Underlined values represent a significant R^2 increase over the highest value for a smaller model.

* $p < .05$.

related to only three of the subordinate scales. No clear pattern was evident.

Discussion

The present study compared three forms of supervisor-subordinate similarity and their relations with subordinate job satisfaction, performance, and pay ratings. Perceived similarity showed the strongest relations, although supervisor and subordinate perceived similarity, which comprised the total perceived similarity score, showed somewhat different relations with the outcome variables. Correlations among variables from a common source (e.g., both from the supervisor) tended to be higher than those from different sources, but significant correlations across sources argued against method variance as the

sole explanation for these findings. Subordinate perceived similarity was positively related to all dependent variables, whereas supervisor perceived similarity was positively related only to performance and pay ratings.

In a similar vein, both perceptual congruence and demographic similarity were related to performance ratings and job satisfaction. Neither was related to pay ratings. This pattern was surprising given the relation between performance and pay ratings ($r = .67$) and the fact that the perceptual congruence measure asked about behaviors important in receiving a high merit pay raise. Furthermore, neither demographic similarity nor perceptual congruence accounted for any significant variance in job satisfaction after the component scores were entered. Only the performance rating was related to all three forms of similarity. This is not unexpected, inasmuch as the hypotheses

Table 4
Correlation of Similarity Measures With Subordinate Scales^a

Subordinate scale	No. of items	Standardized item alpha	Similarity measures			
			Subordinate perceived similarity	Supervisor perceived similarity	Perceptual congruence	Demographic similarity
Incentives	17	.86	.44		.27	
Disincentives	14	.83	-.24			
Demotivating influences	10	.74	-.39		-.24	
Punishment handled quietly	1	—	.42	.31	.26	
Supervisor use of punishment	6	.65	-.28			
Supervisor use of formal rewards	6	.78	.43		.24	
Supervisor use of informal rewards	5	.84	.49			
Performance to pay contingency	1	—			.21	
Psychological influence of supervisor	5	.81	.75	.35	.25	
Upward influence of supervisor	4	.70	.68			
Frequency of communication with superiors	2	.71	.24			
Confidence and trust in supervisor	10	.86	.66	.33	.27	
Role ambiguity	7	.70	-.65	-.26	-.31	
Role conflict	6	.71	-.34			
Group friendliness	8	.80	.31			
Organizational esprit	8	.79	.36			-.23
Organizational professionalism	9	.77	.45		.21	
Humanistic ethic	4	.71			.21	.25
Self-esteem	9	.72	.21		.32	
Self-control rewards	1	—	.21		.22	
Supervisor control rewards	1	—	.22	.25		.23

^a All correlations significant at $p < .01$.

regarding performance ratings were derived directly from previous research, whereas the use of pay ratings and job satisfaction required an extension from such research. Still, it was perplexing that pay rating was related only to perceived similarity. This pattern of differing relations with the dependent measures and the unique contribution of each similarity type for at least one dependent measure suggests that researchers should not discuss the similarity effect, but should instead specify clearly the type of supervisor-subordinate similarity being investigated and consider possible differences in the mechanisms that underlie each form. Research is needed also to determine whether the negative relation of race similarity with job satisfaction was a chance finding or whether race similarity might be linked to different expectations, more stringent job demands, or other such practices.

Much similarity research has assumed that a person perceived as similar is more attractive and that this attraction positively biases evaluation. The present study supports an alternative explanation. Subordinates who perceived the supervisor as similar to themselves and those whom the supervisor perceived as similar reported less role ambiguity, more confidence and trust in the supervisor, and greater influence over the supervisor. If perceived similarity led to a more positive working relation with the supervisor that produced greater insight into what is important in receiving a higher evaluation, insight (rather than bias) might have led to higher performance ratings. This explanation is consistent with findings that the quality and frequency of supervisor-subordinate interactions are important influences on subordinate performance (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980; O'Reilly, 1977). In addition, Kingstrom and Mainstone (1985) found that supervisor responses to a measure of personal acquaintance with the subordinate were positively related to performance ratings and to actual sales productivity, suggesting that the rating reflected true performance differences rather than just bias.

Other causal flows are also possible. Certain perceptions of the environment may lead to perceived similarity, which in turn affects evaluation. Or perhaps, similarity and environmental perceptions may both contribute to the outcome measures. Unfortunately, neither current theory nor the present study provided clear support for one explanation to the exclusion of others. As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, hierarchical regressions were run to determine support for one or another of these models. The results were ambiguous. Different measures supported different models, and a given set of results was often consistent with more than one model. Thus, causal inferences must await studies directly designed to address such issues. Similarity appears to be related to both subordinate perceptions of the work environment and supervisor evaluations of the subordinate, but more research is needed to understand the mechanisms by which similarity influences evaluation.

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