

Effects of Leader-Subordinate Age Difference on Ratings of Leader Effectiveness

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### Abstract

While there have been a number of research studies devoted to understanding the leader-subordinate exchange, together, their analyses have not yet been able to piece together the many facets of this complex relationship. Past studies have ascertained that status incongruence (age differences) between the leader and subordinates affects work outcomes (Perry, Kulik, & Zhou, 1999). To elucidate these findings, others have called into question whether it is the actual age or the social age (perception of an individual's age) that has greater effects on the leader-subordinate relationship (Lawrence, 1988). This paper strives to promote an understanding of how the actual age difference between leaders and subordinates affects ratings of leader effectiveness. Specifically, how ratings of leader effectiveness are affected when the leader is younger than subordinates is addressed.

*Key words:* subordinate age, leader age, leader effectiveness

### Effects of Leader-Subordinate Age Difference on Ratings of Leader Effectiveness

In their research on organizational psychology and leadership, researchers have begun to address the phenomena of the aging workforce. While the value of older workers' experience has continued to make them relevant to organizational success, technology has driven the rapid promotion of younger workers (Oshagbemi, 2004, p. 15). Collins, Hair, and Rocco (2009) recognized that older workers are increasingly having to report to younger leaders, thus the conventional assumptions concerning professional hierarchies are increasingly being thwarted. As a result, investigations of leadership behavior have been designed to assess previously unidentified factors, such as the role of the subordinate follower and the effects of age on workgroups. In efforts to confront this emerging reality, leadership researchers have been encouraged to treat follower attributes as inputs into the leadership process, as opposed to simply outcomes (Avolio et al., 2009).

The practice of leadership is no longer exclusively the domain of older people (Oshagbemi, 2004, p. 15). Therefore, because new power structures are being implemented, all organizational members have to readjust to new social dynamics. These degrees of adjustment are reflected in individuals' work attitudes and values and in particular, affect the relationships within their workgroup. Collins et al.'s findings (2009) support the notion the work outcomes and the quality of the work exchanges depend on how subordinates and leaders respond to such violations of established age norms. Here, age norms are defined as widely shared judgments of the standard or typical ages of

individuals holding a role or status (Lawrence, 1988). Collin et al.'s reasoning suggests that the follower's decision to follow a leader may be a more active process that posits his or her own identity and belief systems in comparison with the perception of the identity and beliefs of the leader (Avolio, 2007). Accordingly, what constitutes leadership may be becoming increasingly dependent on followership.

The current study narrows in on the interaction between leaders' demographic characteristics, specifically their age, and those of the subordinates. The age of individuals has been found to be considerably influential in shaping the philosophy, attitudes, and behavior of members of organizations (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, Myers, 1998). In his research on age and leadership style, Schubert (1988) defined age as a marker that indicates not just the relative stage of the biological process, but also the social-life stage. Given that age is a salient organizational demographic, individuals' conception of their own age and the ages of those in their workgroup significantly impact team effectiveness.

Specifically, the demographic characteristics of leaders and subordinates have been shown to affect work outcomes such as performance ratings (Cleveland & Landy, 1981). An increasing number of organizations have implemented 360 degree feedback procedures. Also called multi-rater assessment, this form of performance appraisal collects data from "all around" a given employee - from his or her peers, subordinates, supervisors, and in some cases, from internal and external customers. This appraisal system allows organizations to gather more reliable performance information and supports

higher involvement styles of management (Waldman, Atwater, & Antonioni, 1998). By giving subordinates the opportunity to evaluate their leaders, the organizations work to incorporate subordinates' values into their operations. Performance appraisals serve an integral role in organizations as the basis for reward allocations and terminations, so the subordinates' ratings carry significant weight (Ferris, Yates, Gilmore, & Rowland, 1985). Of the many factors influencing their appraisals, the effects of subordinates' conceptions of age may be reflected in their ratings of their leaders (Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin, Marx, 2007).

The current investigation studies one aspect of organizational demography, age differences between subordinates and their leaders, within the framework of four theories - two directional and two non-directional - posited by Vecchio (1993), Rudolph (2011), and Perry, Kulik, and Zhou (1999). The perception of age differences between individuals can serve as one basis for sensemaking in social contexts. How subordinates use perceptions of age to make sense of their roles in relation to their leaders can be perceived through their ratings of leader effectiveness.

Four competing models of behavior attempt to explain the driving forces behind subordinates' ratings. The directional theories - the status congruence perspective and the loyalty and commitment perspective - propose that leader-subordinate age differences create a dichotomy between younger and older subordinates. These theories hold that it is the difference between younger and older subordinates that impact ratings of leader effectiveness (Rudolph, 2011, p. 16). The non-directional theories - the

social competition perspective and the similarity-attraction perspective- suggest that any degree of age difference between subordinates and their leader will impact their assessment of leader effectiveness.

These theories emphasize the measure of difference between the subordinate's and the leader's ages as the modifier of ratings of leader effectiveness, rather the direction of the age difference. After defining these four theories further, the current study will review a number of studies through the lenses of these competing models to determine which of the four best illuminates the motivations driving subordinate ratings of their leaders.

## **Literature Review**

### **Directional Theory: Status Congruence Perspective**

The notion of status congruence, in regard to age, suggests that there are perceived norms associated with leader-subordinate age differences. These notions are rooted in psychological principles of self-perception and social comparison (Festinger, 1954). People actively work to self-contextualize within their work settings in order to develop a sense of identity. This follows Turner's (1987) self-categorization theory, according to which people classify themselves and other groups using salient and personally relevant criteria, such as age. Through their comparisons to others, they not only gain insight into their peers, but also into themselves.

Lawrence (1984) supports Turner's claim that people's perceptions of age distributions are the most salient factor in construction of implicit age norms. Age norms are a product of a process termed

psychosocial aging and discussed by Rhodes (1983). She defines psychosocial aging as systematic changes in personality, needs, expectations, and behavior in a sequence of socially prescribed roles (p. 329). Psychosocial aging perpetuates the creation of age norms that allow individuals to determine whether they are “on time” in regards to their career paths in relation to others their age. Hence, the status congruence perspective suggests that when people see themselves as “behind time” (i.e. status incongruent) with respect to others their age, they develop negative attitudes towards those that are “on time” (i.e. status congruent).

It has been found that these perceived age distributions, cultivated in conjunction with, or rather in response to, conventional age norms impact leader-subordinate relationships (Liden, Stilwell, Ferris, 1996). Whether a subordinate is status congruent with his or her leader is expected to affect ratings of leader effectiveness. Rudolph (2011) uses this perspective to explain why older subordinates rate younger leaders lower in effectiveness. He concludes that older subordinates perceive themselves as status-incongruent and their resulting negative reactions affect their ratings of their young leader.

Collins et al.’s study of the older worker younger supervisor dyad (2009) was predicated on the theory of status incongruence. They examined the generational effects of older workers’ expectations of younger supervisors’ leadership and observed the reverse Pygmalion effect, meaning that the older workers had lower expectations for their younger supervisors; therefore, the supervisors were rated as being less effective. They allude to “older workers’ disillusionment with the contrasting

work ethic of the younger generation” (p. 36). Their study furthers understanding of the power of expectations. They conclude that the supervisor-subordinate dyad is negatively affected by demographic differences.

### **Directional Theory: Loyalty and Commitment Perspective**

Unlike the status congruence perspective, the loyalty and commitment perspective does not suppose that age differences have an explicit effect on subordinate ratings of leader effectiveness. Rather, it holds that age differences serve as the catalyst for a specific pattern of subordinate ratings. Rudolph (2011) suggests that higher levels of loyalty and organizational commitment among older subordinates will translate into higher ratings of leadership effectiveness. This perspective assumes that younger subordinates have goals for career progression, thus they are not committed to the organization and consequently, their ratings of leader effectiveness are lower.

Sturges’ (1999) examination of how workers view career success also endorses this perspective. She observed that as workers’ age increased, material criteria for career success generally reduced in importance in favor of an emphasis on influence and autonomy. On the other hand, younger workers criteria emphasized hierarchical and financial progress. This conjecture is also supported by Warr’s (1993) finding that staff turnover declines with age; therefore, older workers maintain their relationships with organizations for longer periods of time, thus making it more likely for them to have positive appraisals of their leaders. In accordance with Schneider’s (1987) supposition that more



committed employees are inclined to stay with an organization, while less committed employees tend to leave, Fisher (1986) found that over time, older employees attitudes towards and appraisals of their leaders became more positive.

Through a categorical methodology, Kabacoff and Stoffey (2001) examined the multi-generational differences in subordinate evaluations of leader effectiveness. Taking a large sample survey of American and Canadian managers and workers, they asked participants to measure leader effectiveness using a set of behaviors. When assessing leaders that were younger than them, workers perceived them to be more comfortable in fast changing environments, more willing to take risks or consider new approaches, to operate with more energy and intensity, they appeared to be working to promote themselves and to be more likely to push competitively to achieve a high level of results. When assessing leaders that were older than them, workers said that they minimized risk, were cooperative, showed greater degree of empathy for other workers, and worked to develop and promote others. The findings also demonstrated that workers believed older leaders maintained a more calm demeanor. This point is echoed by both Bowers' (1952) study, which showed older leaders as being rated to exhibit more steadiness than younger leaders, and Kakabadse et al.'s (1998) study, which found that older workers were more mature and had longer-term perspectives in managing people and systems. These findings are consistent with the loyalty and commitment perspective, as older subordinates exhibited a pattern of rating younger leaders lower since they have yet to show their commitment to the

organization. When evaluating leaders that were older than them, those leaders who have presumably demonstrated their loyalty to the organization, ratings were higher.

### **Non-Directional Theory: Social Competition Perspective**

Age, tenure, and hierarchical position are linked to career progress. As a result, co-workers of similar age may breed perceptions of social competition as they vie for promotion. The social competition perspective contends that these perceptions of competition may drive subordinates to rate similarly aged leaders lower than they would rate leaders that were older or younger than them (Rudolph, 2011, p. 9). Having a similarly aged leader may serve as an unwelcome reminder that one is not “on time” with respect to the career trajectories of others in that age group. Through a process termed age grading, Lawrence (1984) asserts that people use their own age as a benchmark for career progression and success. Consequently, when they are asked to compare their position to similarly aged others, employees expect their careers to progress along the same timeline. When this does not hold true, when a subordinate has to report to a leader who is similarly aged, self-protective motivations come to fruition (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009). As a result, according to the social competition theory, subordinates give harsher ratings of leader effectiveness.

Pairing demographically similar subordinates and leaders may result in intra-group conflict as some forms of demographic similarity, such as age, are stronger triggers of social comparisons than others (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Age’s role in determining both subjective ratings of leader

effectiveness and objective workgroup effectiveness was examined in Liden et al.'s study (1996), in which they observed that workgroups comprised of dissimilarly aged subordinates and supervisors achieved higher levels of objective performance.

In an examination of demography, norms, and performance ratings, Lawrence (1988) deduced that age's role in determining employee behavior and attitudes depended more on people's beliefs about age rather than the ages themselves. This results in socially generated age effects derived from age norms evolved from actual age distributions in the organization. This psychological distance between the actual age distribution and the perception of age serves as the birthplace for the social competition perspective.

### **Non-Directional Theory: Similarity-Attraction Perspective**

The similarity-attraction paradigm suggests that people tend to be attracted to those who share similar personal characteristics, such as attitudes, beliefs, and physical attributes (Byrne, 1961). People are drawn to one another based on perceived similarity, which serves as a form of validation.

Demographic characteristics are immediately recognizable; thus, as previously discussed, their influence on the individual's perception of themselves and others is significant. Applying Byrne's paradigm to relational demography in the workplace suggests that the greater the difference between the subordinate and the leader, the less attracted the subordinate is to the leader.

This lack of attraction is then manifested in subordinates' lower ratings of leader effectiveness

(Rudolph, 2011). He provides evidence that suggests there is a main-effect difference between the ratings provided by older and younger subordinates and those provided by subordinates who share a similar age with the leader. In accordance with this non-directional theory, Rudolph's observations highlight the degree of difference between subordinate and leader as the moderator of ratings of leader effectiveness.

Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) also found that forms of demographic dissimilarity between leaders and subordinates are associated with negative perceptions of job effectiveness. As the dissimilarity between the leader's and subordinates' demographic characteristics increased, they observed a pattern of lower perceived effectiveness of the work group overall. This can be explained using Tsui, Egen, and O'Reilly's (1989) study on demographic diversity and psychological attachment. They found that when individuals differ demographically from other members in the work unit, they are more likely to psychologically, or even physically, withdraw from the group. They observed that as work-unit demographic diversity increased, members had lower levels of attachment and perceived less job effectiveness.

### **Discussion**

While each of these competing models are successful in providing insight into how age affects subordinate ratings of leader effectiveness, none of them are universal as each have certain limitations. The loyalty and commitment perspective founds itself on the premise that older workers have been with

an organization for a longer period of time. This theory does not consider if an older worker were a new employee; rather, the theory assumes that older workers are experienced veterans. The social competition perspective is limited by its narrow realm of applicability. In regard to the current inquiry, this perspective is only valid when subordinates are similarly aged to the leader. The status congruence perspective is limited by its foundational assumptions. It assumes that the organization operates with a high level of transparency. Structural factors affect the salience of status difference (Perry et al., 1999, p. 353). As Oshagbemi (2004) notes, “flatter organizations” give greater interaction between younger and older workers (p. 15). Therefore, the status congruence perspective will be most predictive if the conditions of the organization allow for a high degree of status visibility. For this theory to apply, subordinates need to perceive the age distributions within the organization clearly enough so they may perceive that age norms have been violated in some way (Perry et al., 1999).

Here, it seems that the similarity-attraction perspective offers the most insight and applicability. Because several organizations tend to attract categories of workers with similar attitudes and behaviors, it has been suggested that the challenges arising from age differences may be lessened or even outweighed (Oshagbemi, 2004).

Ultimately, the current study argues that age can influence behavior differently at various stages of one’s career. So while no one theory can account for subordinate perceptions of leadership effectiveness over the span of a lifetime, they can be effectively applied if the conceptualization of age is

broadened. It has been be posited that it is the perception of age that influences subordinates ratings most significantly. Therefore, these four models have the potential to be more generalizable if they can be re-framed to address chronological age (numerical), subjective age (self-perceptions of age), social age (others' perception of age), and relative age (perception of one's age compared to the ages of those in the work group).

### **Conclusions and Future Study**

While the current study is not fully conclusive on its own, it invites further research. Future researchers may want to compare the effects of relevant experience, educational level, and numerical age on worker attitudes and ratings of job effectiveness. Additionally, the role of maturity should be investigated as it is an abstract measure of age that influences social exchange and serves as a critical moderator for the relationship between leader style and efficacy (Vecchio, 2002).

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