

Supervisor--Supervisee Relationships: Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder?

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Cover Page Footnote

Note: Data reported herein were collected as part of the senior author's doctoral dissertation in the Graduate School of Education of Fordham University. For additional information, please contact the corresponding co-author, John Houtz, and the Division of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy, Graduate School of Education, Fordham University, 113 West 60th Street, New York, NY 10023. E-mail: jhoutz@fordham.edu.

Introduction

The purpose of this short report is to provide additional evidence of the reliability of the LMX-7 (Northouse, 2007, 2016) as well as offer potential construct validity data in support of its practical application. The LMX-7 is an instrument designed to assess the degree to which leaders and members of an organization relate to each other for the effective functioning of the organization. The LMX-7 has substantial theoretical development based on Social Exchange Theory and promising evidence of its construct validity (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Nickels & Ford, 2017). It has been used in a variety of studies of supervisor-supervisee relationships. However, with the growth of the field of leadership research, there also has been the increase in instruments to assess leadership relationships and styles, and these instruments need continuing psychometric support for their reliability and validity (Squires, 2018).

In a recent doctoral dissertation (Tamvakologos, 2018), an interesting result was observed that could affect the validity of the LMX-7. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” is a line from a song by Thomas Haynes Bayly (1797-1839; Evans, 1989) and it applies because Tamvakologos found that teachers were rating previous supervisors more favorably than current supervisors, despite similarities in backgrounds and experience. The explanation offered is that negative feelings supervisees might have developed working with previous supervisors might have lessened after time once relationships developed with new supervisors. Such is one of many possible changes in experiential memory that psychologists have examined (Skowronski, Walker, Henderson, & Bond, 2014), and if true, this would suggest that LMX-7 users might limit their judgments of this instrument’s validity under certain circumstances.

The Method

Participants

Two independent samples of teachers participated in the study. The first sample included 110 teachers; the second sample included 38 additional teachers. Demographic data

about age, gender, race, language, experience and training were collected for both samples. These data were similar across both samples and in later statistical analyses there were no significant relationships to the LMX-7 results (Tamvakologos, 2018). Teachers were asked to complete the LMX-7 survey for either a previous supervisor or a current supervisor. Teachers were not asked to identify their supervisors and the research did not involve any contact with supervisors.

Instruments Used

The demographic survey. The demographic survey asked participants several questions about age, gender, number of years and area of teaching, and number of years in their current position. From the first sample of 110, 89 were women, 19 were men, and 2 participants chose to not answer the questions on the demographic survey. In terms of ethnic identity, 87 participants identified as white/Caucasian, 4 as African American, 7 as Hispanic, 5 as Asian, 4 chose the “other” category and 3 chose no answer at all. Although all 110 participants took the surveys in English, 19 of them identified that they spoke another language besides English, 5 only spoke English, and 3 did not answer this question. When it came to identifying how involved each individual was with his/her supervisor, 6 people answered not very, 48 answered average, 44 answered very, and 2 again chose not to answer that particular question.

Of the second sample of 38, thirty-two participants were women and 6 were men. 27 of the participants identified as white/Caucasian, 2 as African/American, 2 as Hispanic, 5 as Asian, and 2 chose to identify as “other.” Although these participants also answered all of the survey questions in English, 9 of them shared that they spoke another language other than English, 25 indicated that they only spoke English, and 4 of the participants chose not to answer this question. When it came to identifying how involved each individual was with his/her supervisor, 6 people answered not very, 19 answered average, and 13 answered very. Lastly, 8

participants referenced a previous supervisor and 30 participants referenced a current supervisor.

Your supervisory relationship. The LMX-7 (Northouse, 2007, 2016) attempts to measure three constructs in regards to leader-member relationships: respect, trust, and obligation. Items ask individuals to make such judgments as how well their leader (or follower) understands their own work needs or how well they would be supported if difficult situations arose. Rather than considering such exchanges as separate and individual interactions, the assumption is that the effects of those exchanges are best thought of as forming one unit which, over time and depending upon how positive or negative is the mutuality between leaders and followers, productivity is affected (Nickels & Ford, 2017).

The LMX-7 is comprised of 7 items. Each item is answered on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 refers to the most negative answer and 5 to the most positive. The higher the score on this questionnaire, the stronger the relationship between the leader and the follower.

Procedures

Participants were recruited by Qualtrics. Qualtrics™ (www.qualtrics.com) is a private crowd-sourcing company (and now part of SAP, www.sap.com, an enterprise application software company) that can recruit participant samples according to researchers' needs. Researchers and participants have no direct contact with each other in order to preserve anonymity. Qualtrics charges a fee for this service and provides a variety of reports to researchers. Once the survey questions were uploaded to the Qualtrics platform, participants responded in just a few days.

The present authors applied for and received approval to conduct the research from their institutional review board (IRB) for research with human participants. Statistical analyses included both descriptive (see below) and inferential computations. Since Alshamasi and Aljojo (2016) reported a wide range of reliability estimates from .60 to .90, reliability data via Cronbach alpha coefficients also were computed for the present samples.

Results of Sample One

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for age, years of teaching experience, years in current job, the Supervisor Style Ratings, and the LMX 7 survey. The mean age of the teachers who answered the survey questions was 40.95 years old, yet their individual ages ranged from twenty-three years old to eighty-one years old with a standard deviation of 13.38 years. The average amount of years that these teachers had been teaching was 12.70 years, but varied greatly from as little as one year to as many as 43 years with a standard deviation of 9.00.

In terms of total number of years in his/her current position, the average was 6.75 years but once again varied from less than one year to 35 years with a standard deviation of 6.23 years. Lastly, the mean score for the LMX-7 was 25.44, but answers ranged from 9 to 35 with a standard deviation of 6.68. The LMX 7 survey yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability estimate of .93 (N = 108).

Independent *t*-tests between men (n = 15) and women (n = 67) revealed no significant differences in age, years of teaching experience, years in their current position, the ratings of their supervisors' problem solving styles, or the LMX-7 survey. But, independent *t*-tests between previous and current supervisors' ratings revealed a significant difference on LMX 7 ratings in favor of previous supervisors ($t = 2.81$, $df = 81$, $p = .006$). Previous supervisors' mean was 29.35 (SD = 5.36) compared to current supervisors' mean of 24.83 (SD = 6.53).

Results of Sample Two

The mean age for the participants was 39.27 years old with ages ranging from 24 years old to 81 years old and a standard deviation of 13.01 years. In regards to total years teaching for the participants in part II, the mean was 11.32 years. However, total years ranged from 2 years to 35 with a standard deviation of 8 years. One's years in his/her current position ranged from less than one year to 35 years with a mean of 6.84 years and a standard deviation of 6.92 years. . The mean score for LMX 7 Total Score was 25.89. However, scores varied from 11 to

34, and the standard deviation was 5.86. The LMX 7 survey yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability estimate of .91 ($N = 38$).

There were no significant t -test comparisons for gender on age, years teaching, years in current position, level of perceived supervisor involvement, whether participants were multi-lingual, in LMX 7 scores. However, when comparing previous ($M = 31.86$, $SD = 1.35$, $n = 8$) versus current ($M = 24.85$, $SD = 5.68$, $n = 30$) supervisors on LMX 7, there was a significant difference ($t = 3.209$, $df = 31$, $p = .003$). Again, previous supervisors were rated more highly.

Discussion

The data reported above provide two potentially useful results for the study of supervisor—supervisee relationships. First, reliabilities of the LMX-7 survey from the present two samples are as high as those reported by Alshamasi and Aljojo, and they are from individuals of different demographic characteristics than those of Alshamasi and Aljojo.

Second, the higher ratings for previous supervisors have implications for the validity of the assessment. As mentioned above, we did compute analyses using age, years of experience, and years in current position as controls and there was no significant effect on the results. What we argue is noteworthy is that the more favorable ratings for past supervisors seem to support the Fading Effect Bias, FAB (or Pollyanna Principle), that memories for more positive experiences last longer while negatives fade more quickly (Skowronski, et. al., 2014). We found the same result in two samples. We may assume the likelihood of some negative experiences developing in any supervisor-supervisee relationship over time, and that any such experiences will be more salient in current relationships. Then, when individuals are asked to rate their relationship with a past supervisor, the FAB or Pollyanna Principle should predict the higher ratings for past supervisors.

Research on leader-follower relationships is essential to the field. But, researchers need to consider the limitations to the validity of the surveys used if they do not account for the “currency” of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Much of leadership research has focused

on “state-of-the-relationship-now” assessments, and this can be useful. On the other hand, if the goal involves application of findings to improve the organization over time, and there are changes in personnel as part of the process, then data collected at an earlier time, and subject to FAB, may provide an over-positive baseline to which to compare, as in pre-to-post assessments. Researchers would do well to recall that reliability and validity are not the same. Reliability can be a stable characteristic of a measure, but validity may vary considerably with the purpose and context of the assessment.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Sample One (N = 108)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	SE
Age (N = 107)	40.95	13.38	23	81	1.29
Years Teaching (N = 108)	12.79	9.00	1	43	.87
Years in Current Position	6.75	6.23	-1	35	.60
LMX 7 Total Score	25.44	6.68	9	35	.64

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Sample Two (N = 38)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	SE
Age	39.27	13.01	24	81	2.14
Years Teaching	11.32	8.00	2	35	1.30
Years in Current Position	6.84	6.92	-1	35	1.12
LMX 7 Total Score	25.89	5.86	11	34	.95