The Relation Between Job Satisfaction and Personality Similarity in Supervisors and Subordinates

Leann D. Rhodes
Elizabeth Yost Hammer* 
Belmont University

Organizational behavior has become an extensively researched area of psychology (e.g., Bauer & Green, 1996; Day & Bedeian, 1995; Jain, Lall, McLaughlin, & Johnson, 1996), and research shows that personality plays a large part in the underlying components of behavior in the workplace. The purpose of this study was to determine whether personality similarity also plays a role in organizational behavior. The present study examined the variables of locus of control and agreeableness similarity between supervisors and subordinates and the relation of these variables to job satisfaction. A total of 37 participants from the administrative staff of a southeastern private university completed questionnaires measuring agreeableness, work locus of control, and job satisfaction. Personality similarity scores were obtained from supervisors’ and subordinates’ individual scores. Results support the hypothesis that supervisors and subordinates with a high level of agreeableness similarity have an increased level of job satisfaction. However, we found no relation between similarity of work locus of control and job satisfaction. Implications for the workplace, as well as future research, are discussed.

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR, A CONCEPT CONCERNED with affective states and behaviors in work concepts, is a topic of much research (e.g., Bauer & Green, 1996; Day & Bedeian, 1995; Jain, Lall, McLaughlin, & Johnson, 1996). Because personality plays a large role in our behaviors, George (1992) expected that personality also plays a role in the theorizing and research in the area of organizational behavior. However, organizational researchers have held personality factors in low regard until recently. It was not until the 1990s that researchers began to focus on personality as playing an important role in organizational behavior (George, 1992). Researchers have linked personality with many subjects in the field such as management styles (Runyon, 1973), personal control (Greenberger, Strasser, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989), job satisfaction, and job performance (Norris & Niebuhr, 1984).

As personality began to increasingly influence the field of organizational behavior, personality similarity made its debut (e.g., Day & Bedeian, 1995). Personality similarity refers to similarity in the type of personality attribute measured between two persons or groups. Evidence suggests that people with personality similarities have better relationships with one another presumably because they behave in similar ways (Day & Bedeian, 1995). Holland’s (1966, as cited in Day & Bedeian, 1995) theory suggests that individual similarities within an organization become evident through greater job satisfaction.

One of the most common and widely used measures of personality is locus of control (Spector, 1988). Locus of control refers to the tendency to attribute cause or control of events to internal or external factors (Rotter, 1966, as cited in Liebert & Spiegler, 1994). Internal locus of control is the belief that outcomes are the result of one’s own efforts, whereas external locus of control is the belief that outcomes are the result of luck, chance, or powerful others (Liebert & Spiegler, 1994). Andrisani and Nestel (1976) state that locus of control is relevant in an employment experience, because internal–external locus of control can determine aspects of work experience, as well as be a direct result of that experience. Similarity in locus of control consists of two individuals’ having the same state of mind about the source

Copyright 2000 by Psi Chi, The National Honor Society in Psychology (Vol. 5, No. 2, 56–59 / ISSN 1089-4136). *Faculty Supervisor

Author note. We would like to thank Dr. Elliott D. Hammer, Department of Psychology, Tennessee State University, for his assistance and data analysis.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Leann Rhodes Phillips, c/o Dr. Elizabeth Hammer, Department of Psychology, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70118-6195.
of their outcomes, with both believing in their own efforts (internal) or both believing in luck, chance, or other outside influences (external).

An extension of Rotter’s original locus of control scale was developed by Spector (1988) for use specifically in organizational settings. Spector (1988) found this scale was a better predictor of locus of control in an organizational setting because it correlated with job satisfaction, perceived influence at work, and other aspects of the work field in comparison with the generalized locus of control scale (Spector, 1988). Because work locus of control indicates how cause is attributed, similarity in work locus of control between those persons with whom we work might increase job satisfaction. If two people attribute the cause or control of events to the same source, either internal or external, there would be less reason for conflict, which could in turn lead to greater job satisfaction.

Agreeableness, one of McCrae and Costa’s (1987) five robust factors of personality, also is associated with job satisfaction. Agreeableness is an important attribute when working within an organization (Day & Bedeian, 1995). Compared to the antagonistic person, the agreeable person is sympathetic, cooperative, trusting, and interpersonally supportive (Liebert & Spiegler, 1994). Agreeableness is a reliable predictor of performance and satisfaction in the workplace (Day & Bedeian, 1995). Judge and Ferris (1993) state that being substantially different in terms of agreeableness could lead to disliking or a less than satisfactory relationship with a supervisor or higher authority figure.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relation between work locus of control similarity between supervisor and subordinate, agreeableness similarity between supervisor and subordinate, and job satisfaction. We predicted that as work locus of control and agreeableness similarities increase between supervisor and subordinate, job satisfaction also will increase. Further, as agreeableness similarities between supervisor and subordinate increase, job satisfaction also will increase.

Method

Participants

The participants were volunteers from the administrative staff of a small, private, Baptist-affiliated, 4-year university in the Southeast. Thirty-seven persons (2 male and 4 female supervisors, 11 male and 20 female subordinates) took part in the study.

Materials

Spector’s (1988) Work Locus of Control Scale (WLCS) measured locus of control. This instrument consists of 16 items that specifically measure control beliefs in an organizational setting. Participants rate each item on a scale from 1 (disagree very much) to 6 (agree very much). WLCS scores range from 16 to 96, with low scores representing internality and high scores representing externality.

Because the focus of the current study was similarity of personality variables rather than actual raw scores, we derived similarity scores between supervisor and subordinate. We obtained similarity in work locus of control by taking the absolute value of the difference between the supervisor’s work locus of control score and the subordinate’s work locus of control score. Multiple subordinates were often employed in the same department; therefore, it was necessary to use the supervisor’s score multiple times in order to obtain difference scores.

Agreeableness was measured by a portion of the Five Factors of Personality Test (NEO PI-R; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Questions pertaining to the agreeableness component of personality assessed trust, skepticism, cooperativeness, and rudeness (McCrae & Costa, 1987). The agreeableness portion of the test consists of 48 items out of 240 items. The responses are based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). High scores represent high levels of agreeableness.

Because the focus of the current study was similarity of personality variables rather than actual raw scores, we calculated similarity in agreeableness scores between supervisor and subordinate by taking the absolute value of the difference between the supervisor’s agreeableness score and the subordinate’s agreeableness score. Again, we used supervisor’s scores multiple times to obtain difference scores, due to the fact that multiple subordinates were employed in the same department.

A portion of the Survey of Organizations (SOO; Taylor & Bowers, 1972) measured job satisfaction. The SOO asks participants to rate their satisfaction level for their work group, supervisor, organization, and chance of progress (Day & Bedeian, 1995). The job satisfaction portion of the SOO consists of eight questions. Seven filler questions from other portions of the SOO completed the 15-item questionnaire used in this study. Participants responded to these questions on a 1-to-5 scale; scores ranged from 15 to 75.

Procedures

The participants met at times arranged by the experimenter. In order to compare scores between supervisor and subordinates, the experimenter gave each department a code number. This code number was used on the demographics questionnaire when
the participants identified themselves as supervisor or subordinate. Participants completed informed consent forms and then filled out the four questionnaires. Questionnaires were counterbalanced across participants. After completing the questionnaires, all participants were debriefed.

Because of the busy schedules of university employees, it was necessary to have three supervisors fill out the questionnaires by delivering them through campus mail. They were provided with the same set of instructions given to persons attending the meeting. An informed consent form and stapled letter containing debriefing information also was enclosed. After completing the packet of questionnaires, the participants had an opportunity to ask questions about the study or the debriefing procedure over the telephone.

**Results**

The mean and standard deviation characterized the descriptive statistics of job satisfaction, work locus of control similarity, and agreeableness similarity. The mean of job satisfaction was 29.9 (SD = 5.6). Work locus of control similarity had a mean of 10.4 (SD = 8.2). Agreeableness similarity had a mean of 22.7 (SD = 13.8).

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) determined the correlation between job satisfaction, work locus of control similarity, and agreeableness similarity. Job satisfaction and agreeableness similarity between supervisors and subordinates were significantly related, r(29) = .35, p = .03; respondents who were high in job satisfaction tended to be more similar in agreeableness. The correlation between work locus of control similarity and job satisfaction approached significance, r(29) = .28, p = .08. Agreeableness similarity between supervisors and subordinates and work locus of control similarity between supervisors and subordinates also were significantly related, r(29) = .38, p = .02; respondents who were high in agreeableness similarity had higher work locus of control similarity scores.

**Discussion**

We hypothesized that as work locus of control similarity between supervisor and subordinate increased, job satisfaction would increase, and that as agreeableness similarities between supervisor and subordinate increased, job satisfaction would increase. Results of this study show when agreeableness similarity is greater between supervisor and subordinate, job satisfaction also tends to be greater. Day and Bedeian (1995) report agreeableness is a reliable predictor of job satisfaction, whereas this study shows that agreeableness similarity is a modest predictor of job satisfaction. On the other hand, the predicted relation between work locus of control similarity and job satisfaction achieved limited support. The present results also indicate that when agreeableness similarity is high between supervisor and subordinate, work locus of control similarity is also high. Because work locus of control and agreeableness are highly stressed attributes in all aspects of life, similarities in these attributes support Day and Bedeian’s (1995) finding that persons with personality similarity have better relationships.

A potential limitation in this study was the relatively small sample (N = 37), which restricted the power of the statistics. Future studies with larger samples may yield more consistent results. Another limitation is the structure of the departments. Because of this structure, supervisor’s scores were used multiple times for subordinates working in the same department. The structural fact that all supervisors and subordinates did not work closely together also raises questions about the power of the experiment. Despite these limitations, the results of this study have several implications.

One implication is that when persons in the workplace acknowledge and understand personality similarities, specifically similarities in agreeableness, greater job satisfaction may occur. Such information can assist in employee and leadership selection, interdepartmental communication, and problem-solving procedures. Acknowledgment of both the similarities and differences in supervisor and subordinate personalities may create a better understanding of each individual’s strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. Further, when employing an individual, acknowledging certain personality types with whom the employee will work closely may enhance the job description by increasing understanding of what personality strengths are needed for the job. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals in the organization could also strengthen interdepartmental communication. For example, if an organization is building a team from different departments, certain personality similarities could play a large part in the success of that team. Because problem-solving procedures usually involve more than one person, extreme personality differences could interrupt the problem-solving process, causing the decision to be less effective.

Future research should explore the possibilities of using other robust factors of personality, such as conscientiousness or extraversion, as variables in a similarly hypothesized study. Day and Bedeian (1995) found that conscientiousness is related to job perfor-
mance; it would be interesting to research its relation to job satisfaction. It would also be interesting to use extraversion as a variable to examine whether comfort in a social setting can account for job satisfaction levels. Research should examine other settings, such as nonacademic settings, in order to vary organizational styles and occupations. Research on personality similarity between coworkers, instead of a sole similarity between the supervisor and the supervisor’s subordinate, is also suggested. Such research could produce helpful results if working in an organization built around teamwork.

References