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ABSTRACT

While past research has documented the independent effects of individual difference characteristics and contextual information on perceptions of leadership, it has not investigated the simultaneous effects. This study explored the interactive effects of these factors under the hypothesis that dispositional characteristics should be more strongly related to perceptions of leadership when performance information is unavailable than when it is available (i.e., a hypothesized diminution of individual difference effects with salient contextual information). College students (N=80) were randomly assigned to one of eight cells in a 2x2x2 design manipulating the level of exhibited leader behavior, the availability of post-observational performance information, and the type of ratings desired. Subjects viewed one of two 15-minute videotapes demonstrating two varieties of leader behavior, and provided information on their own gender, age, locus of control, task/person orientation, leniency response bias, and confidence in rating the leader's behavior. In addition, bogus performance information was given to half the subjects within each behavior condition. Analyses of reported perceptions of observed leader behavior offered partial support for the diminution effect, as well as some evidence of individuals discounting contextual information. (NB)

A Preliminary Analysis of the Effects of Individual Difference Characteristics and Knowledge of Results on Perceptions of Leader Behavior

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Running head: PERCEPTIONS OF LEADER BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

While past research has documented the independent effects of individual difference characteristics and contextual information on perceptions of leadership, it has not investigated the simultaneous effects. The present study explored the interactive effects of these factors under the hypothesis that dispositional characteristics should be more strongly related to perceptions of leadership when performance information is unavailable than when it is available (i.e., a hypothesized diminution of individual difference effects with salient contextual information). Subjects (N=80) observed a segment of leader behavior, and provided information on their gender, age, Locus of Control, task/person orientation (LPC), leniency response bias, and confidence in rating the leader's behavior in a study manipulating the availability of post-observational performance information. Analyses of reported perceptions of observed leader behavior offered partial support for the diminution effect, as well as some evidence of individuals discounting contextual information.

A Preliminary Analysis of the Effects of Individual Difference Characteristics and Knowledge of Results on Perceptions of Leader Behavior

From a social perception perspective, leadership may be considered a form of social status ascribed to others on the basis of the extent to which various influence attempts are viewed as either personally or normatively acceptable (Hollander, 1978; House & Baetz, 1979). Accordingly, considerable effort has been devoted to understanding the nature and basis of subordinate perceptions of leader behavior. Recognizing that subordinate reports of even the same leader behavior are seldom in agreement, many researchers have examined several potentially significant determinants of these differential perceptions (Schriesheim & Kerr, 1977). Of the potential determinants, the impact of observer characteristics and extraneous contextual information are considered to be two of the more important sources of variance. That is, differences among individuals in dispositional characteristics such as needs, values, and attitudes are considered important determinants of whether (and how) particular behaviors are ultimately viewed in terms of the accorded status of leadership (Lord, Phillips, & Rush, 1980). Similarly, an observer's understanding of the context and consequences associated with attempted leadership (e.g., level of performance attained by a group) is also thought to significantly influence perceptions of exhibited leader behavior (Larson, Lingle, & Scerbo, 1984).

Several investigations (Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Lee & Alvarez, 1977; Lord et al., 1980) have documented significant relationships between observer characteristics and leader perceptions. While specific effect sizes are typically small and inconsistent across rated dimensions, the potential magnitude of the effect is clearly illustrated in the study by Lord et al. (1980). They, like others, found that peer ratings of leadership, influence, and social power among members of four person groups were

significantly associated with the observer's gender, Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966), and task/ person orientation (LPC; Fiedler, 1967). More importantly, they provided evidence suggesting that between 17 and 44 percent of the variance in social perceptions, after controlling for group and ratee differences, was uniquely associated with the observer. They also found that social perceptions were dependent upon the level of task behavior exhibited by the ratee, as well as the level of performance attained by the group.

Other studies have also indicated that knowledge of contextual (e.g., performance) information significantly affects leader perceptions, especially when the perceptions are memory-based. It has been consistently shown for example, that observed leader behavior thought to result in "poor" performance is rated significantly lower than the same behavior thought to result in "good" performance (Larson et al., 1984; Lord, Binning, Rush, & Thomas, 1978; Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977). These bogus performance cue effects have generally been viewed as a manifestation of cognitive integration and simplification processes thought to be universally endemic to person perception (Rush, Phillips, & Lord, 1981).

While the aforementioned research has documented some of the more important determinants of leader perceptions, the research, in general, has failed to consider that dispositional and contextual factors may be operating simultaneously in natural settings. Despite the lack of specific research, recent developments in social cognition and leadership (Calder, 1977; Kaplan, 1975; Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982) suggest that contextual information may moderate the impact of observer characteristics; i.e., dispositional and contextual factors may influence leader perceptions in a nonadditive or disjunctive fashion.

Work in the area of social cognition, for example, suggests that

people greatly simplify the task of interpersonal understanding through a process called "cognitive categorization". Essentially, categorization involves a process of identifying a particular stimulus as a member of a certain class of stimuli (i.e., a category). Applied to the area of leadership (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982), the categorization process argues that the case of perceiving someone as a leader involves a process of determining whether or not the person resembles the expected qualities of a leader. Specifically, perception and classification are thought to involve judgments as to the similarity of the stimulus person to a category prototype (e.g., leader) based on the traits, behaviors, and performance information observed or inferred about the stimulus person. Prototypes serve as an abstract representation of the most representative or widely shared features among members of a particular category (Rosch, 1978), and are thought to provide an essential and highly efficient means for assimilating (i.e., encoding and storing) extensive information about the stimulus person. Prototypes are also thought to facilitate recall of observed behavior. Schematic processing can, however, introduce a deceptively coherent pattern of memory-based descriptions since observers frequently experience difficulty in distinguishing between prototypic information and information particular to the stimulus person (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986).

This categorization perspective suggests that salient performance information should facilitate classification of a stimulus person by cueing prototypes related to the specific performance outcome. To the extent that observers share common performance-based prototypes of leadership, performance information should also result in a diminution of individual difference effects in memory-based leader perceptions. That is, a salient cue for cognitive retrieval should override the individual predispositions to view and recall observed behavior from their distinctly different individual

perspectives.

The present study was conducted as a preliminary attempt to explore this issue; i.e., how observer characteristics (i.e., individual differences) and contextual performance information specifically interact to influence perceptions of leadership. While a detailed analysis of inferred mediating processes is beyond the scope of the study, the previously noted theoretical perspectives suggest that salient outcome information may facilitate and simplify interpretation of observed leader behavior. Accordingly, performance information should lessen the impact of observer characteristics as a determinant of leader perceptions by providing a common frame of reference from which to evaluate and recall observed behavior. Although tentative, this diminution hypothesis suggests that observer characteristics should be more strongly related to reported perceptions of leader behavior when performance information (knowledge of results) is unavailable to the observer than when it is available. Thus, a significant performance cue by observer characteristic interaction should be evident for leader perceptions.

Method

Subjects

Extended analysis of data drawn from an earlier study (Rush & Beauvais, 1981) provided the opportunity to explore the diminution hypothesis. The data were provided by 80 subjects (51% female; 19 to 29 years of age; freshman to graduate student status) who were randomly assigned to one of eight cells in a 2x2x2 design manipulating the level of exhibited leader behavior, the availability of post-observational performance information, and the type of ratings desired.

Procedure

Subjects were told that they would view a 15 minute color videotape of

a four-person problem solving group and then rate the leader's behavior as part of a validation study of behavioral description measures. Prior to actually viewing the videotape, subjects were asked to complete several individual difference measures known to be related to leader perceptions (cf., Lord et al., 1980; Schriesheim, Kinicki, & Schriesheim, 1979). Specifically, subjects provided information concerning their gender, age, Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966), task/person orientation (Least Preferred Co-Worker (LPC) scale, Fiedler, 1967) and leniency response bias (Schriesheim et al., 1979). Responses to the Locus of Control, LPC, and leniency scales were summed across items to produce the respective composite scores.

Following collection of the individual difference measures, subjects listened to taped instructions which indicated who (by position) was the designated group leader, and stressed the importance of closely attending to his behavior throughout the session. The subjects then viewed one of two videotapes varying only in the quantitative level of structuring and task oriented behaviors exhibited by the leader (the leader behavior manipulation).

After viewing the videotape, half the subjects within each behavior condition received bogus performance information informing them that the observed group had performed second worst out of 24 groups studied on the sentence reconstruction task. The remaining subjects were not given any information about the group's performance (the post-observational performance manipulation). All subjects were then asked to complete the Initiating Structure, Consideration, Role Assumption, and Production Emphasis scales from the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (Stogdill, 1963). Half of the subjects were instructed to provide complete ratings of the leader behavior dimensions, while the others were urged to

rate only the items they felt they could confidently and accurately rate (the rating type manipulation). Finally, all subjects indicated their confidence in providing accurate ratings of the observed leader behavior using a 5-point scale ranging from extreme confidence to little or no confidence. This confidence factor was included among the individual difference variables investigated in the study.

Analysis

In order to examine the effects of interest, each rated dimension of leader behavior was first regressed on the full linear model representing the main and interactive effects of the manipulated variables.[1] An individual difference variable was then entered into the equation and tested for significance. Finally, the unique interactive effects for observer characteristics and availability of performance information were examined in the third step of the analysis. The possible interactive effects of the rating type manipulation with observer characteristics and knowledge of results were also explored independently in the third step of the analyses. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant interactions between observer characteristics and the behavioral manipulation or the rating type manipulation. Given the exploratory nature of the study, effects achieving probability values ($p < .10$) are reported.

Results

The results of the analyses and estimated cell means for significant effects are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. As indicated in the lower portions of Table 1, several relationships conform to the predicted diminution effect. For example, knowledge of results moderated several of the relationships between observer gender and leader perceptions (ie., Initiating Structure, Role Assumption and Production Emphasis; $t = 1.93$,

1.93, 2.73; p=.059, .059, .009, respectively). As predicted, the relationships in each case, were stronger when performance information was unavailable to the subjects than when it was available, with women reporting higher levels of observed leader behavior than men. There was also an indication, evident by the significant three way interaction (t=2.09, p=.049), that the dimunition effect for ratings of Production Emphasis was even stronger when subjects were asked to provide complete ratings of leader behavior.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

The relationship between age and ratings of Production Emphasis also was in accord with the expected pattern of results. Inspection of the estimated cell means (see Table 2) for the three way interaction (t=1.97, p=.053) revealed that age was positively related to leader perceptions, but only when performance information was unavailable and subjects were asked to provide complete ratings. Similarly, subjects' confidence in providing accurate ratings was positively related to perceptions of Consideration, but, again, only when performance information was unavailable to the subjects (t=2.19, p=.048). The latter effect is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Table 1 also reports a significant interaction of age and performance information for ratings of Initiating Structure and Role Assumption (t=2.18, p=.048; t=1.68, p=.098, respectively). Closer inspection of the interactions, however, revealed that age was more strongly related to perceptions of leader behavior when performance information was available

to the subjects than when the information was unavailable. These results are in direct opposition to those expected under the proposed "diminution" hypothesis, and suggest that younger subjects tended to discount the negative performance information in their evaluations of the leader's structuring and role assumption behaviors. For ratings of Role Assumption, this "discounting" effect was even more evident, as indicated by the marginal three way interaction (t=1.73, p=.092), when subjects were asked to provide complete as opposed to incomplete ratings of the leader's behavior.

There were also two other unexpected relationships evident in the data. One concerns the effect of Locus of Control. Examination of the marginal three way interaction (t=1.98, p=.051) for Consideration ratings indicated, as predicted, that observer's Locus of Control was more strongly related to leader perceptions in the absence of performance information than when information was available. However, the relationship was negative (internals reported higher levels of observed Consideration) with incomplete ratings, and positive with complete ratings. Aside from the predicted mitigating effect of knowledge of results, we can only begin to speculate as to the meaning of these relationships.

The other anomaly concerns observers' tendency towards social leniency. The findings suggest a marginal relationship between leniency and perceptions of Role Assumption (t=1.74, p=.089), which varied as a function of the rating manipulation and the availablity of performance information (t=1.75, p=.089). Examination of the interaction effect (see Figure 1) indicated that, as expected, more lenient observers tended to perceive higher levels of Role Assumption than less lenient observers. With incomplete ratings, this relationship was evident only when performance information was unavailable (i.e., the diminution effect). With complete ratings however, the relationship between leniency and ratings of Role

Assumption was substantially larger when performance information was available than when it was unavailable to subjects (i.e., a discounting effect), and was substantially larger than the relationship obtained under the incomplete rating format. The pattern of relationships seems to suggest that observers high in social leniency tend to discount negative performance information when asked to evaluate inferred levels of leader behavior (complete ratings), but are no more lenient than their peers when confronted with salient performance information and asked to rate only clearly observable behaviors (incomplete ratings).

Discussion

Historically, residual variance in social perceptions has been largely attributed to simple measurement error. More recently however, researchers have made a concerted effort to describe and understand sources of variance which can result in differing perceptions of observed behavior (Schriesheim & Kerr, 1977). Observer characteristics (i.e., personality) and the availability of additional contextual information are two of the more important extraneous sources of variance that have been documented in the literature. Limitations not withstanding (e.g., length of observation, effect size, level of interaction, etc.), the results of the present study offer some preliminary, albeit weak, evidence that these two sources of variance may moderate each other. In some cases, salient knowledge of results appears to have overshadowed dispositional tendencies (the predicted diminution effect). In other cases, knowledge of results seems to have amplified the effect of observer characteristics, as though observers of particular disposition or character were ignoring or dismissing available performance information when forming their impressions of the leader (an unexpected but understandable discounting effect).

To briefly recount, the analyses revealed some evidence of a

diminution effect with knowledge of results for age (in relation to ratings of Production Emphasis), confidence and Locus of Control (for Consideration ratings), and gender (for ratings of Initiating Structure, Role Assumption, Production Emphasis). The analyses also revealed that sometimes the effect was evident only under particular rating conditions (e.g., locus of control and Consideration ratings when subjects gave incomplete ratings; age and gender and Production Emphasis ratings when complete ratings were given). In each case, however, observer characteristics were more strongly related to leader perceptions when outcome information was unavailable to the subjects than when it was available.

While these results seem to support the hypothesized diminution effect, there was also some evidence that performance information served to amplify differential perceptions (i.e., age in relation to ratings of Initiating Structure; age and social leniency in relation to perceptions of Production Emphasis). It is interesting to note that these latter effects were evident only with complete ratings, and that in the case of social leniency, incomplete ratings seemed to promote the opposite diminution effect. Analyses also revealed a few direct, unmoderated relationships between observer characteristics and leader perceptions (i.e., self-assessed confidence and ratings of Initiating Structure; gender and ratings of Consideration). If nothing else, these results reinforce the notion that perceptions of social behavior are a result of a complex interaction between the clarity of exhibited behavior (Initiating Structure and Role Assumption in the present study), the inferential demands of the reporting instrument (complete vs. incomplete ratings), observer characteristics, and the availability of other contextual information.

Despite the apparent complexity, there seems sufficient evidence to draw some tentative conclusions concerning the interplay of observer

characteristics and contextual information. As noted, there was a fairly consistent (albeit marginal) trend across characteristics and dimensions in which salient outcome information seemed to engender or promote reasonably consistent leader impressions, thereby displacing the effect of observer characteristics. Presumably, observers differing in disposition judge and evaluate observed behavior from different frames of reference (cf., Kelly, 1955; Rice, 1978). This effect should be particularly pronounced in relatively ambiguous situations (situations devoid of any context or ground in a Gestalt sense) where observers have only their own impressions of observed behavior on which to rely. Salient knowledge of results may serve to clarify the "perceptual field" by providing a commonly understood frame of reference within which to evaluate and recall observed behavior, thus lessening the incidence of differing dispositionally-related perceptions.

Interestingly, much of the cognitively oriented literature suggests that observers store and retrieve global person impressions in schematic form (cf., Rush, Phillips & Lord, 1981; Srull & Wyer, 1979). The literature also suggests that additional contextual information is readily incorporated into existing schemata (cf., Feldman, 1981; Lord et al., 1982), but is unclear as to whether individuals differ in their ability (or inclination) to assimilate new information. Our results suggest that, in general, integrated information processing may be a fairly universal process in relation to observer characteristics. The exceptions in the present study seemed to be the younger and more socially lenient subjects.

As noted, the younger and more lenient subjects were less influenced by the negative performance information in terms of their perceptions of Role Assumption than their counterparts, but only when asked to provide complete leader behavior descriptions. Again, we can only speculate as to why; but, possibly, more lenient individuals are less inclined to draw the

inferred link between "poor" performance and less readily observable behavioral dimensions. In any event, the data also seem to suggest that salient contextual information and ratings low in inferential demand (incomplete ratings) serve to mitigate the leniency effect.

Naturally, further research is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn. The results presented are admittedly marginal in size and may be particular to the sample, the design and manipulations, and the length and/or nature of observation. It should be noted, however, that the magnitude of the relationships found in the present study approximates those reported in other literature for similar variables (cf., Durand & Nord, 1976; Lord et al., 1980; Schriesheim et al., 1979). The fairly consistent relationships involving gender also approximate other literature (cf., Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Lee & Alvarez, 1977). While the exact psychological basis of many of these relationships are poorly understood (e.g., gender), research suggests that observer characteristics may be important determinants of social perceptions, particularly (as the present study suggests) in relatively ambiguous situations. Further research investigating the interaction of observer characteristics, contextual information, and characteristics of the perceived may help clarify some of the processes and factors involved in determining social perceptions.

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Author Notes

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Footnotes

1. These results were originally reported in Rush and Beauvais (1981), and will not be represented here. The analyses essentially revealed: (1) a significant behavioral effect for Structure, Assumption, and Production Emphasis; (?) a significant performance cue effect for all rated leader behavior dimensions; and, (3) no significant performance cue by rating condition interactions for any rated dimensions.

Table 1

Summary Coefficients for the Unique Interactive Effects of Observer Characteristics, Available Performance Information, and Rating Condition Predicting Leader Perceptions.

	Beta (t-value)			
	Initiate Structure	Consideration	Role Assumption	Product Emphasis
Main effects (df=1,71)				
Age	-18 (1.79)^	-14 (1.21)	-22 (2.39)*	-04 (<1)
Confidence	20 (2.28)*	14 (1.32)	17 (1.96)*	14 (1.39)
Leniency	07 (<1)	04 (<1)	15 (1.74)^	08 (<1)
LPC	-08 (<1)	10 (<1)	-04 (<1)	-01 (<1)
Locus	06 (<1)	11 (1.01)	13 (1.53)	04 (<1)
Gender	04 (<1)	27 (2.55)*	05 (<1)	07 (<1)
Interactive effects with Performance Information (df=1,70)				
Age	95 (2.18)*	-16 (<1)	66 (1.68)^	12 (<1)
Confidence	11 (<1)	81 (2.19)*	27 (<1)	39 (1.07)
Leniency	25 (<1)	39 (1.24)	-12 (<1)	26 (<1)
LPC	08 (<1)	-10 (<1)	-18 (<1)	22 (<1)
Locus	-19 (<1)	-26 (<1)	-05 (<1)	-02 (<1)
Gender	58 (1.93)*	07 (<1)	54 (1.93)*	87 (2.73)*
Interactive effects with Performance Information and Rating Condition (df=1,70)				
Age	22 (<1)	-06 (<1)	74 (1.73)^	98 (1.97)*
Confidence	-09 (<1)	-06 (<1)	-26 (<1)	-13 (<1)
Leniency	-18 (<1)	-18 (<1)	-45 (1.75)^	-22 (<1)
LPC	58 (1.46)	70 (1.55)	35 (<1)	29 (<1)
Locus	31 (1.37)	50 (1.98)*	02 (<1)	31 (1.27)
Gender	13 (<1)	-07 (<1)	05 (<1)	68 (2.09)*

Note. Reported coefficients (decimal points omitted) represent the unique, hierarchical effects for designated variables after the main and interactive effects for the behavioral, performance cue, and rating manipulations were entered into the equation (see text). Interactive effects also control for main effect of designated variable.
^p<.10. *p<.06

Table 2

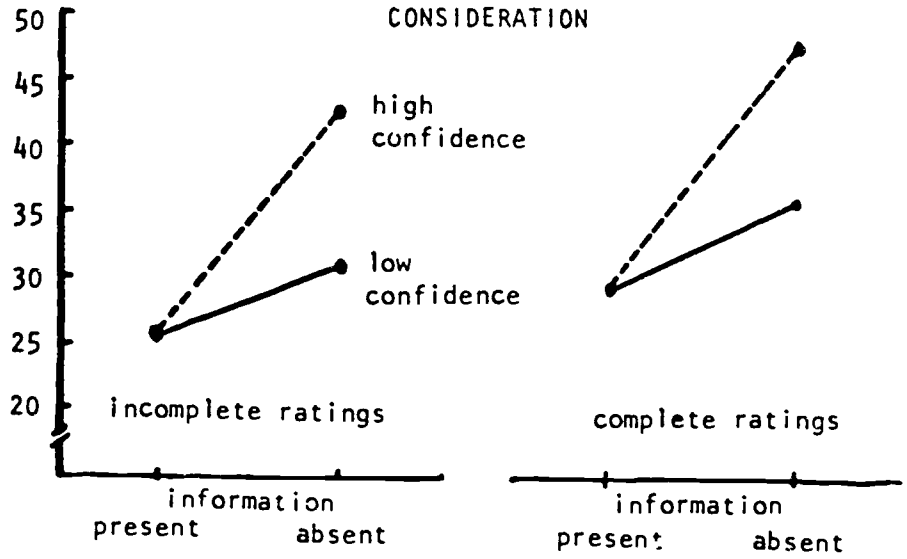
Estimated Cell Means of Leader Perceptions by Level of Observer Characteristic and Available Performance Information for Incomplete and Complete Ratings

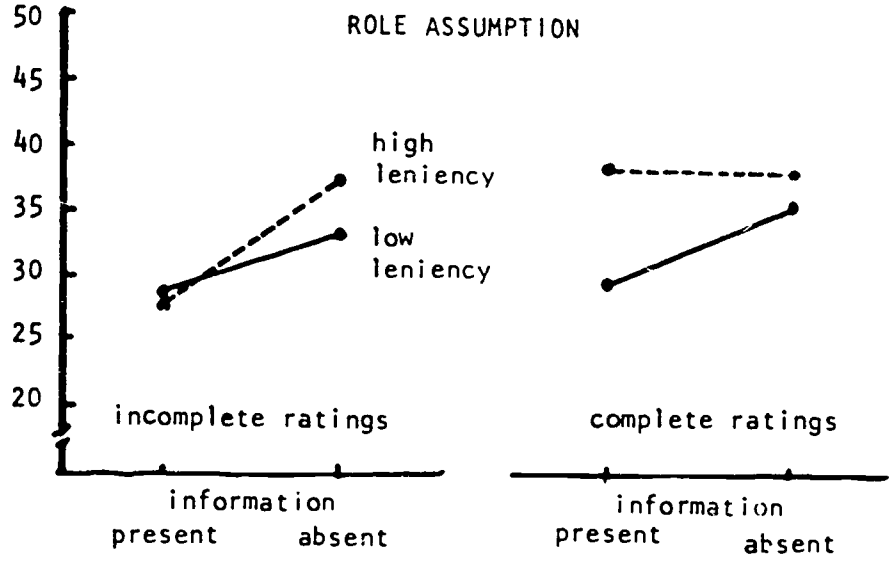
		Incomplete Ratings Information		Complete Ratings Information	
		Present	Absent	Present	Absent
Initiate Structure					
Age	younger	31.88	34.40	37.20	35.12
	older	26.84	31.04	37.12	37.12
Gender	male	30.34	30.56	34.94	35.56
	female	28.02	34.56	32.22	39.36
Consideration					
Confidence	low	25.27	30.59	29.67	35.59
	high	25.29	42.31	29.49	47.11
Locus	internal	32.46	39.94	29.06	35.78
	external	34.25	34.77	29.01	37.33
Role Assumption					
Age	younger	28.79	36.29	39.03	35.65
	older	25.67	32.53	32.07	38.29
Leniency	low	28.38	33.66	29.42	35.28
	high	27.82	36.78	38.62	37.46
Gender	male	28.87	32.01	35.01	35.95
	female	27.82	35.08	33.32	40.82
Product Emphasis					
Age	younger	21.86	28.35	25.74	26.63
	older	22.42	26.66	24.06	32.63
Gender	male	22.71	26.17	26.79	27.51
	female	21.99	27.73	21.11	37.19

Note. Estimates were derived for (20,28) (1,5) (5,13) (7,15) levels of age, confidence, locus, and leniency, respectively.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean ratings of leadership illustrating: (a) the "diminution" effect of knowledge of results on rater confidence for perceptions of Consideration, unmoderated by rating condition; and, (b) the "discounting" affect of social leniency and knowledge of results for perceptions of Role Assumption, with complete ratings.


CONSIDERATION
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
high confidence
low confidence
incomplete ratings
complete ratings
information present absent
information present absent


ROLE ASSUMPTION
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
high leniency
low leniency
incomplete ratings
complete ratings
information present absent
information present absent