

Is Relational Demography Relative? How Employment Status Influences Effects of Supervisor–Subordinate Demographic Similarity

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Abstract

Purpose Because diversity is vital to many businesses, it is important to understand how demographic differences between individuals in the workplace influence employee behavior. In this study, we focused on demographic similarity (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity) with one's supervisor as a predictor of employee withdrawal. Further, we examined employees' employment status (i.e., part-time vs. full-time) as a moderator of the similarity–withdrawal relationships. **Design/Methodology/Approach** Using two nationally representative U.S. surveys containing more than 2,000 combined respondents, we examined variability in employee withdrawal (i.e., tardiness, absenteeism, and intent to remain).

Findings The results indicated that having a supervisor belonging to one's race/ethnic group has a greater impact on withdrawal among part-time than full-time employees. Race/ethnic similarity corresponded in less tardiness and absence, and higher intent to remain for part-timers. Similarly, sex similarity corresponded in lower levels of absence for part-timers.

Implications Employee withdrawal costs companies millions of dollars each fiscal year. If supervisor–subordinate dissimilarity corresponds in higher withdrawal among part-time employees, then it is imperative for researchers to determine how this might be remedied.

Originality/Value Research utilizing relational demography theories has shed considerable light on our understanding of demographic differences in the workplace. A notable shortcoming of these frameworks, however, is their failure to fully consider boundary conditions influencing the potentially detrimental effects of demographic dissimilarity. We propose that the similarity effects described in previous research may vary as a function of employment status.

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Despite the widespread popularity of the adage that opposites attract, the truth seems to be that most people are drawn to similarity, at least where readily observable features are concerned. In fact, research on social networks consistently demonstrates an overwhelming tendency to surround ourselves with demographically similar others (McPherson et al. 2001). One reason for doing so is that