

A DEVELOPMENTAL ANALYSIS OF RATING BEHAVIOR

by

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B.A., The Pennsylvania State University, 1977

A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Psychology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1981

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Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks is expressed to the members of my supervisory committee, including Drs. Frank (Skip) Saal, Ronald Downey and Leon Rappoport, for their direction, patience, and above all, uncompromising support in seeing this project through its completion.

I especially would like to thank my thesis advisor, Skip, whose contributions to my experience in graduate school, both intellectually and personally remain unchallenged. Not only were his psychological, practical, and critical literary suggestions throughout this project invaluable toward its completion, but his wit, understanding, and confidence in me along the way served to effectively temper even the most difficult of times.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
LIST OF TABLES	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
Development	3
The Organismic-Developmental Orientation	4
Developmental Assumption	4
The Holistic Assumption	5
Rating Behavior	6
Cognitive Structure	8
Cognitive Complexity Perplexity	10
The Pervasiveness of Cognitive Complexity	11
Zajonc's Method	13
Summary	15
METHOD	16
Participants	16
Procedure	16
Cognitive Complexity	16
Performance Ratings	17
RESULTS	19
DISCUSSION	27
Development of Cognitive Complexity	27
Differentiation and Hierarchic Integration	30
Cognitive Development and the Psychometric Characteristics of Ratings	32
CONCLUSION	34
FOOTNOTES	36
REFERENCE NOTES	37
REFERENCES	38
APPENDICES	

LIST OF TABLES

- Table 1: Class Analysis as a Function of Time.
- Table 2: Mean Scores as a Function of Time.
- Table 3: Intercorrelations Among Differentiation, Hierarchic Integration and Halo.
- Table 4: Correlations as a Function of Class, Academic Level and Age.

A Developmental Analysis of Rating Behavior

Performance appraisal judgments have continued to interest industrial psychologists for more than five decades; their widespread use and importance have been recently described in considerable detail (Landy & Farr, 1980; Saal, Downey, & Lahey, 1980). Most of the research on judgmental measures of performance has focused on a limited number of variable classes including ratee characteristics, both psychological and biodemographic types of rating scales and scale format characteristics, and the purposes for which ratings are solicited. Unfortunately, even after all these variables have been considered, the light shed on the rating process has been somewhat less than blinding. Consequently, a more recent trend in rating research has been to concentrate on the rater as an active processor of information, and on how the rater's cognitions interact with other facets of the rating situation.

A rater characteristic that is receiving increased attention is cognitive complexity. Although there is some confusion as to the exact definition of the term, it is generally (Adams-Webber, 1979) held that cognitively complex persons are prone to make finer distinctions among dimensions of complex stimuli, whereas cognitively simple persons make relatively grosser discriminations of the same stimuli. Schneier (1977) examined the effects of both the rater's cognitive complexity and the cognitive demands of various rating scale formats on the psychometric properties of ratings and the rater's perceptions of those ratings. His results suggested a "cognitive compatibility theory" of rating behavior: When the raters' cognitive complexity was compatible with the scale format's complexity, ratings were characterized by less leniency and less range restriction, and raters reported increased satisfaction with, greater confidence in, and a preference for that particular format. Halo was inversely related to

cognitive complexity regardless of rating scale format. Although these results apparently support a cognitive-process orientation to rating behavior, replication of these results has not been forthcoming.

Recent studies (e.g., Bernardin & Boetcher, Note 1; Lahey & Saal, in press) failed to support the relationship linking cognitive complexity and scale format complexity. Using an identical measure of cognitive complexity and a single rating scale format, Bernardin & Boetcher found no significant differences between complex and simple raters with respect to leniency and halo measures. Moreover, Lahey & Saal, using three different measures of cognitive complexity and four rating scale formats, found no systematic differences between complex and simple raters in tendencies to exhibit leniency, halo, and range restriction, nor in raters' confidence in their ratings. Further, their most important finding was the absence of any cognitive complexity x scale format interactions. Since Schneier's (1977) results are becoming widely cited, and are proving instrumental in encouraging other researchers to investigate cognitive capabilities of raters, it behooves us to examine these studies in light of one another, and to design additional empirical studies with an eye toward reconciling seemingly contradictory results.

A different approach, emphasizing process considerations, relies heavily on a developmental framework. Without questioning the underlying assumptions, it has been tacitly assumed that a state of equilibrium, stability and rest is a more realistic picture of the rater than a state of upheaval, uncertainty and change. But the history and development of a rater cannot reasonably be ignored. Landy & Farr's (1980) "process model implies that the rater's experience with ratings affects the validity of those ratings." They further stated: "We know little or nothing about the effects which decisions based on current ratings have on future ratings. Research in this area is long overdue" (p. 101).