ABORIGINAL EMPLOYEES AND LOCUS OF CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

Locus of control is a much researched psychological construct. Internals believe that outcomes are related to their own efforts whereas externals tend to believe that outcomes are due to the role of factors external to their own efforts. The research on locus of control has tended to rely on samples that are male and white. This paper notes that Aboriginal employees have been largely ignored in both the locus of control and management literature. This paper develops hypotheses relating to locus of control for male and female Aboriginal employees and discusses future research implications.

INTRODUCTION

Locus of control is part of a much larger theory developed by psychologist Julian Rotter (1954) called social learning theory. Social learning theory states “the potential for any behaviour to occur in a given situation is a function of the person’s expectancy that the given behaviour will secure the available reinforcements (outcomes), and the value of the available reinforcements (outcomes) for that person” (Lefcourt, 1966, p. 207). Rotter (1954) theorized that a reinforcement acts to strengthen an expectancy that a particular behaviour or event will be followed by that reinforcement in the future. Once an expectancy for such a behaviour-reinforcement sequence is built up, the failure of the reinforcement to occur will reduce or extinguish the expectancy. According to Rotter (1966) as children develop and acquire more experience, they begin to differentiate between events which are causally related to preceding events and those which are not. Rotter (1966) hypothesized that depending on the individual’s history of reinforcement, individuals would differ in the degree to which they attributed reinforcement to their own actions.

Those with an internal locus of control would be more likely to attribute the reinforcements to their own actions than those with an external locus of control. For example, a sales associate with an internal locus of control would be likely to feel that he/she closed the sale due to his/her own abilities. Conversely, a sales associate with an external locus of control would be likely to feel that he/she closed the sale because of luck or strong economic conditions. The construct of locus of control continues to have traction in the management literature because of the research that differentiates internals and externals with respect to key organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction and stress. Internals (relative externals) tend to be more committed to organizations (Kinicki & Vecchio, 1994; Luthans, Baack & Taylor, 1987), are more satisfied with their jobs (e.g. Mitchell, Smyser & Weed, 1975; Organ & Greene, 1974a) and are less stressed (e.g. Anderson, Hellriegel, & Slocum, 1977; Hendrix, 1989).

The goal of this paper is to point out some weaknesses in the locus of control literature and subsequently develop hypotheses for a group of people who have been virtually ignored in the management literature (i.e. Aboriginal employees). Please note that the term Aboriginal encompasses First Nations status Indians, non-status Indians, Inuit and Metis. This paper is divided into four different sections. First, an overview of locus of control and social learning theory is presented followed by a criticism of the existing research. Second, an overview of the locus of control research on gender and cross-cultural differences will be presented. Third, hypotheses will be developed. Fourth, a discussion of future research implications will be presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inherent in social learning theory are two important assumptions about behaviour. First, the potential for a given behaviour to take place will be higher when an individual highly values the reinforcement (i.e. outcome) and he/she sees a strong likelihood that he/she is able to attain that reinforcement. Second, to accurately understand behaviour,
both personal determinants (skill, locus of control) and environmental determinants (the situation, the value of the reinforcement, performance barriers) must be utilized.

One of the key issues identified in this review of locus of control and social learning theory is the way these concepts have often been misconstrued and misinterpreted. This can have serious repercussions for researchers of locus of control because their research may contain serious methodological flaws. This section will provide an overview of some of these misconceptions.

First, there is a tendency to assume that locus of control construct is the most significant aspect of social learning theory. Rotter (1975) disagrees and notes that he and his colleagues (Liverant and Crowne) were interested in a variable (i.e. locus of control) that might help refine predictions of how reinforcements change expectancies of success or failure. The nature of the reinforcement itself, whether positive or negative; the past history, sequence, and patterning of such reinforcements; and the value attached to the reinforcement are obviously important determinants of behaviour.

Second, there is a concern that locus of control is often considered as a trait. Feshbach et al., (1996) suggest that traits provide us with convenient methods of organizing information about others, of describing how they have behaved in the past, and of making predictions about future behaviour. A key assumption of personality theory is that these traits remain stable and enduring over time. For example, if you are an aggressive person, you will be aggressive in many different settings (Feshbach et al., 1996). Rotter (1966; 1975) was adamant that locus of control not be thought of as a trait. Locus of control is a generalized expectancy, depending on the situation and the value of the reinforcement, someone may express a tendency toward an external locus of control in a given situation (personal love life) but express a tendency toward an internal locus of control in another situation (a given sport or hobby). “What a general measure of locus of control allows us to do is describe each individual’s ‘average’ locus of control attributes over many situations. But we should remember that the wider the range of situations, the less predictive the concept will be. Therefore, (locus of control) may do a good job of predicting people’s behavior in general but miss rather badly in any specific situation” (Phares, 1976, 46).

Third, there is the problem of positioning internals as the “good guys” and externals as the “bad guys” leading to what Rotter (1975) refers to as a ‘good guy-bad guy’ dichotomy. It is assumed that internals are well-adjusted while individuals with very high external scores are maladjusted. This is problematic for several reasons. First, several studies (e.g. Phares, Ritchie & Davis, 1968) have noted that internals typically repress failures and unpleasant experiences. “Consequently, they may report less anxiety, fewer symptoms etc., and thereby create a positive relationship between internality and adjustment” (Rotter, 1975, p. 61). Furthermore, someone who scores extremely high as an internal may not be well-adjusted since there are limits to the perception of personal control. Lefcourt suggests that an internal who feels they have more control than is realistic (e.g. that they can control the weather or political figures) may exhibit “maladjustment or abnormal behaviours such as paranoia or delusions of grandeur” (Lefcourt, 1982, p. 182).

In conclusion, “locus of control is not a characteristic to be discovered within individuals. It is a construct, a working tool in social learning theory that allows for an interpretation of remarks made by people in response to questions about causality. Measures such as Rotter’s locus of control scale are simply devices created to elicit those expressions of belief” (Lefcourt, 1982, p. 149). Therefore, while it is true that this paper will often refer to people as either internals (those with an internal locus of control) or externals (those with an external locus of control), this is done in order to be concise and does not imply the acceptance of locus of control as a trait.

Gender and Cross-Cultural Differences of Locus of Control

It is important to recognize that a great deal of the locus of control research either used white, male sample groups (e.g. Abdel-Halim, 1981, Houston, 1972, Norris & Neibuhr, 1984) or it is assumed that the majority of subjects were white and male because the gender and race of the subjects was not discussed (e.g. Anderson et al., 1977; Luthans et al., 1987; Mitchell et al., 1975). As noted by Dyal, “it takes no great cultural awareness to suppose that white, U.S. university students might not be an entirely representative sample of humankind” (Dyal, 1984, 210).

A review of the existing research on gender differences (e.g. Jacobs, 1976; Strickland & Haley, 1980) and cross-cultural differences (e.g. Alvarez & Pader, 1978; Battle & Rotter, 1963; Tyler & Hosinger, 1975) suggests the results
are largely inconclusive as to whether women or men or whites or non-whites are more external. The difference in findings depends upon sample size, which locus of control scale is used, and the socio-economic status of the sample.

One group that has been under-researched in the management literature is Aboriginal employees. This group needs to be understood by management researchers and employers given that Aboriginals are the “fastest-growing part of the Canadian population” (Hill & Sloan, 1996) and will form a substantial proportion of the workforce in certain Canadian provinces. Gandz (1999) notes the population of Aboriginal people is expected to grow by 50 percent in the next 20 years (from 1 million to 1.5 million Aboriginals by 2016). Given the huge human capital potential of Aboriginal employees, it is of interest for Canadian employers to understand any potential cross-cultural differences.

This leads us to our central research questions: Are Aboriginal employees more likely to be internals or externals (relative to non-Aboriginals)? Are female Aboriginal employees more likely to be internals or externals (relative to Aboriginal males)?

Existing research on differences in locus of control between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals and differences in locus of control between male and female Aboriginals is of limited use because previous studies have relied on samples of elementary and high school students (e.g. Halpin, Halpin & Whidden., 1981; Tyler & Holsinger, 1975) and the results have been inconclusive. More useful for employers and management researchers would be a focus on a sample of employed Aboriginals.

Before proceeding, one more cautionary note is offered. Discussing gender and race is often a sensitive matter since it is my intention not to perpetuate or reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, any discussion of women and Aboriginals is done in the context of examining certain differences in general. Nothing implies an assumption that all members of a given group would exhibit high levels of externality or internality on the locus of control scales.

**Hypotheses**

In developing the hypotheses for this paper, it is useful to acknowledge the contribution of Hofstede (1993) and Redpath and Nielsen (1997). Hofstede surveyed over 100,000 IBM employees in 40 countries about their values. Hofstede developed an approach to examine cross-cultural differences along dimensions such as: individualism-collectivism, masculine-feminine, low-high uncertainty avoidance, low-high power distance and short-term-long term time orientation. The dimensions of individualism-collectivism and masculinity-femininity are the most relevant for the discussion in this paper.

While there is very little management literature examining Aboriginals in the workplace, one exception is the work of Redpath and Nielsen (1997). The authors used a case study approach and applied Hofstede to examine differences in values between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals. The fact that a case study was used limits the generalizability of the findings. This paper intends to apply what is known about the works of Hofstede and Redpath/Nielsen and apply this knowledge to the hypotheses about Aboriginal locus of control.

According to Hofstede (1993), some countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States tend to be individualistic and value individualistic behaviour (e.g. looking after oneself, being self-sufficient and independent). Therefore, a concept such as locus of control fits well with North Americans’ embrace of individuality as a positive trait. Societies such as China and Japan who embrace collectivist values (e.g. harmony of the group over self-expression) may be more inclined to see things from an external locus of control perspective and may be more at ease in embracing the role of fate and luck. Aboriginals tend to value collective action, egalitarianism, spirituality and consultation of the group prior to making a decision (Dufault, 2003; Kenny, 2002, 2004; Redpath & Nielsen, 1997) thus consistent with the collectivist values from Asia. This leads us to hypothesize:

H1: Aboriginal employees are more likely to be externals than non-Aboriginal employees.

Hofstede (1993) also differentiates between national cultures based on a masculinity-femininity continuum. Countries with higher masculinity scores value assertiveness and competitiveness whereas countries with higher femininity scores value relationships and well-being of others (nurturance). Furthermore, sex roles in society are more clearly differentiated in a high masculinity country. Therefore, it is hypothesized that for countries ranking high in
masculinity (e.g. Japan, Mexico), there will be significant differences in the locus of control scores between men and women with women reporting higher scores as externals. Aboriginal cultures do tend to express classic feminine values for relationships and well-being of others (e.g. Dufault, 2003) but also tend to have more stratified views on gender roles (e.g. Dufault, 2003; Kenny 2002). Therefore, Hofstede’s masculinity-feminity continuum may not accurately capture Aboriginal values on this complex subject. Therefore, this leads us to two competing hypotheses:

H2a: Aboriginal men and women will differ in locus of control scores with Aboriginal women more likely to be externals than Aboriginal men.

H2b: Aboriginal men and women will not differ in locus of control scores.

Cross-cultural differences in locus of control beliefs can have practical implications for managers. First, managers must avoid making stereotyped assumptions about an employee based on cross-cultural differences in locus of control and not assume that an employee of a given ethnic or racial background is automatically external. Second, managers should be aware of the role that luck and fate may play in some cultures. This may have an impact on whether or not an employee sees a particular reward (e.g. public praise, individual bonus) as motivating and whether or not the employee will perceive that his/her efforts will lead to these rewards.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In conclusion, very little is known about Aboriginal people’s workplace beliefs. Existing frameworks such as Hofstede’s may be inadequate to understand the cultural values of Aboriginals. Future research would entail using a multi-method approach on a sample of adult, employed Aboriginals. First, a quantitative survey would be used to test these hypotheses using an established locus of control scale (e.g. Rotter’s I-E scale, Rotter, 1966). Second, a qualitative design would be used to understand what other cultural values are common to Aboriginal peoples thus building on the work of Hofstede and Redpath/Nielsen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


