Research Paper

Locus of Control and Stress in Organisations

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous possibilities leading to stress at workplace. These include conditions like high expectations from the employees or too much work load which leads to isolation of individual from others. In such cases, the individual feels that his knowledge is insufficient for performing the role. Also, there could be conditions where the resources allocated are not sufficient as per the requirements of the work or when there is a lack of communication among the members of the organization leading to the lack of growth in the job, etc. Additionally, the changing nature of work, in the context of globalization and increased technology, has led to a sharp increase in occupational stress. High rates of mergers, acquisitions, increasing economic interdependence among countries due to globalization, technological development, and restructuring have changed the organizational work culture; which in turn have resulted in time pressure, excessive work demand, role conflicts and problematic customer relationships, all of which are contributing to the accumulated stress. This document attempts to collate various facets of personality factors and organisational factors which contribute to stress in the work environment. Also, described are some coping strategies employed by internals. Although the theories meant originally for western societies are imposed on Asian studies, a concerted effort needs to be made for study of stress with respect to the Indian work environment, especially with stress intensive studies, especially in the IT sector.

Our society is being transformed from an industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy. This requires a newer definition of learning. In the work environment, with the onslaught of more sophisticated technology, fiercer global competition, and a slowing economy, organizations are constrained to adopted various adaptive strategies to maintain a competitive advantage. They include outsourcing, restructuring (and dismissal of staff) which may result in a sense of job insecurity among employees (De Witte, 2005). We have noticed this to be more pronounced in the recent pandemic throughout the globe.

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During such times, people who are more internally controlled will resist influence aimed to bypass their own moral judgment and will respond only to influence that is similar to their own beliefs and values. When individuals perceive that they have no influence in decision making, levels of work excitement decrease.

This document highlights the characteristics of broadly two groups of people in the work environment with respect to handling of occupational stress – the internals and externals. In organisational psychology, it has been found that internals are more likely to take positive action to change their jobs (rather than merely talk about occupational change) than externals.

The document also focuses on the personality aspects of control like personality, coping style, self-esteem, self-efficacy and the belief system of an individual. The organizational aspect which determines the concept of control discussed here are – influence of the work environment, role of the manager and leaders, organizational commitment, work excitement and learning, work characteristics. This is followed by a brief description of burn out and control commitment. The final section discusses about the coping strategies of internals and externals with respect to work stress.

What is Locus of Control (LOC)?
Locus of control (LOC) is the degree to which people actually believe that they have the control over the outcome of the events in their lives, as opposed to forces beyond their control. It simply refers to the extent to which one believes that events in one's life are contingent on one's own behaviour. Such persons are called **internals.** They believe and act as if they control their own futures and see themselves as effective agents in determining the occurrence of reinforcing events in life.

In contrast, there are **externals** who believes in external control of reinforcements attributes their outcomes to chance, luck, fate, powerful others, and so on (Rotter, 1966). Individuals with internal LOC may likely change their behaviour following reinforcements than those individuals with external LOC.

While, Rotter (1966) dichotomized control as internal or external, Levenson (1974) constructed a tripartite distinction, on the basis of the idea that persons with chance orientations believe the world is unordered and will thus behave differently from persons who believe the world is ordered but that powerful others are in control. According to him, general LOC is a stable personality trait, but control orientations often are situationally determined.

Classifications of LOC
Rothbaum et al. (1982) proposed a theory that suggests control can be classified into two categories—primary and secondary. These will help us understand the various forms of control exercised by individuals in organisations.
- **Primary control** consists of actions taken by a person to change the world, or in other words is the attempt to adapt the world to the person. It represents cognitively mediated action designed to change the person's appraisals and emotional reactions.
- **Secondary control**, on the other hand, involves changing the self to fit the external environment. Secondary control consists of four different forms (Rothbaum et al., 1982). **Predictive control** involves actions taken to enhance the ability to predict

what will happen in the future. This enables the person to maintain self-esteem, since if one doesn't really try, one didn't really fail.

- **Illusory control** involves making attributions to chance, and can result in both seeking out chance situations (e.g. playing the lottery) and engaging in superstitious behaviour.
- **Vicarious control** is sought by associating with powerful others who have power, such as managers in the organisation.
- **Interpretive control** consists of attempts to find meaning in events. This control is mainly cognitive action that may help a person cope with the world, by selectively attending to information that maintains beliefs about events.

Rothbaum et al. (1982) point out that secondary control can involve highly motivated action and a high level of effort, and is just as important as primary control in adaptation because it helps us cope with what is uncontrollable. Heckhausen and Schulz (1995) echo this idea in their developmental theory, arguing that both forms of control are important, and that secondary control functions to maintain and support primary control.

Personality aspect of LOC
External LOC is negatively correlated to feelings of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction is negatively correlated to stress (Blegen, 1993). Therefore, it is not surprising that a positive correlation exists between external LOC and emotional exhaustion. In this connection Rotter's contribution in Social Learning is of paramount importance.

Rotter's Social Learning theory of Personality
Rotter's LOC theory has its roots in social learning theory which attempted to provide insight into complex human social behaviour. A particular behaviour is more likely to occur if it is associated with high reinforcement value and expectancy. Thus, the **Reinforcement value** is the degree of preference for a particular reinforcement if various alternative reinforcements are available and **expectancy** is the probability that the particular reinforcement will occur as a result of an individual's behaviour.

There are other relevant personality traits which are briefly discussed hereunder:

Persistence
Persistence is defined as individuals who were more likely to display the following behaviours: ability to stay on task without prompting, work steadily along the entire work period and work at routine jobs without resistance (Bolton & Roessler, 1986). Research indicates that higher levels of work personality does predict more internalized LOC and higher levels of job-readiness self-efficacy and that individuals with more persistence had more internalized LOC.

Consultation and coping style
Persons who believe that events in their lives are contingent on their own actions are perhaps more prone to actively seek consultations with others and seek change in the form of help-seeking behaviour when they perceive that their job outcomes do not accurately reflect their abilities and efforts. Under stress, such persons may also be likely to generate positive thinking in order to maintain or increase feelings of mastery and perseverance.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a belief about how can an individual can act under certain conditions regardless the skills he/she possesses and about his or her ability to perform a specific behaviour. Bandura (1986) believed that self-efficacy was a portion of social cognitive theory.

Self-efficacy theory has been applied to a variety of career and vocational related behaviours including job search intentions (Eden & Aviram, 1993), career choice (Betz & Hackett, 1981), task performance and persistence (Jacobs, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 1984), interview readiness and performance, and employment outcomes for individuals with psychiatric disorders.

Self-efficacy influences perceptions of actions and coping behaviours and the choice of environments and situations in which the individual will attempt to access. It can be something that people use to deal with the stress that they are faced with in their everyday lives. Research suggests that higher levels of external LOC combined with lower levels self-efficacy are related to higher illness-related psychological distress.

The concept of self-efficacy is situation-specific – it suggests that one will have a range of both high and low self-efficacy expectations at one time depending on specific situation, task, or behaviour. Individuals who have high levels of efficacy expectations will be more likely to persist with behaviours when they become difficult and will therefore be more likely to execute the behaviour successfully which in turn increases their efficacy expectations even more (Bandura, 1998). Those with low efficacy expectations will likely avoid situations in which they feel unable to cope.

Self Esteem

It is defined as an evaluation of one's personal worth. Normally, self-esteem reflects a person's overall appraisal of his or her own worth" (Cotton 1985). In addition, self-esteem includes beliefs and emotions, such as triumph, despair, pride and shame.

Plenty of studies have argued the effects of self-esteem. Some researchers found self-esteem can greatly affect performance. Negative self-esteem cause failure to meet companies' goals, loss of standards, wishes and performance. A lack of self-esteem may lead to employee turnover intention and burnout which is discussed in the next section.

Belief

LOC refers to the degree to which a person believes that personal action can influence outcomes of life. This concept deals with whether or not individuals believe that they possess behaviour skills that in turn will determine the received reinforcement. It is a personality dimension, a continuum, not a typology; there is nothing consistent in an individual.

According to Rotter (1966), individuals with a belief in internal control perceive that life events depend upon their behaviour or characteristics which they possess. These individuals believe that they control their own destiny and based on their behaviour an occurrence of either a positive or negative reinforcement will strengthen or weaken potential for that behaviour to recur in the same or similar situations (Rotter, 1966). In general, "persons with a strong belief in internal control are more confident and assertive, are active searchers for information that will help them to achieve their own objectives and are attracted to situations

that offer opportunities of achievement" (Bush, 1988). They see themselves as responsible for their success and take responsibility for their own failures. This notion fails to consider that direct control is not the only means of achieving control, and that cultural differences may affect how people experience and view control.

Let us now turn our attention to the concept of control with respect to the organisation.

Organisational aspect of LOC
We have seen earlier that Internals believe that events that occur in an organisation like promotions, salary increases, praise, appointments, and general career development is not determined by their own actions and behaviour, but by external forces such as chance, luck, fate, good fortune or powerful others.

There are various related concepts which needs to be discussed with reference to the organisational aspect. This will help us to identify the handling of stress which will be discussed in the next section.

Influence on Environment
People with an internal LOC believe that they can influence in creating empowered work environment, and that their actions affect what happens to them. On the other hand, people with an external LOC believe that they have little influence over the environment and what happens to them is due to external factors such as luck, or the actions of others.

Research findings support the viewpoint of Adams (1999), signifying that LOC is a critical psychological attribute affecting one's perceptions of their environment and job attitudes.

Role of Managers and leaders
People with an internal LOC engage in strategies to change their manager's behaviour and also use more task-oriented coping strategies (Anderson, 1977) compared to people with an external LOC.

Therefore, internals may perceive that they are more in control of the quality of the relationship with their manager, and, since they use more adaptive coping strategies, be perceived as more pro-active and deal better with stressful situations. Likewise, externals relied more on socio-emotional characteristics (e.g., perceived affinity, immediacy, affect) during interaction (Avtgis & Brogan, 1999). They found that that employees across a variety of work environments who reported having work-specific external LOC were less satisfied with co-workers, supervisors and top management, and perceived themselves as being less influential in the organization.

Organizational commitment
It is generally considered to be the degree to which employees believe in and accept organizational goals and desire to remain committed with the organization. In a study by Coleman, Irving and Cooper (1999), they found out that there is a significant relationship between LOC and organizational commitment.

Organizational commitment declines with increasing degree of externality. A study reported that individuals with external LOC are likely to be less committed to their organization than those with internal LOC.

It has been observed that a person who is committed to a particular organization shows a strong desire to remain a member of his organization. Thus, internals are more likely to work for achievements. Studies have shown that organizational commitment among employees promotes organizational effectiveness through job performance and quality and low levels of tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover.

People with internal LOC report higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment and relationship. Spector (1988) explains that in organizational settings, rewards or outcomes include promotion, favourable circumstances, salary increases and general career advancement. Viewing the self is closely linked to LOC.

Work Excitement and Learning
Work excitement can be defined as the personal enthusiasm and interest in work and is reflected through creativity, receptivity to learning, and ability to see opportunity in everyday situations.

To achieve a high level of work excitement and empowerment, employees must believe and build up generalized expectancies that their own actions or behaviours may be the cause of positive or negative reinforcement. Otherwise, they may be unable to see opportunities in everyday situations; nor are they receptive to learning if they believe that only chance, luck, fate, or powerful others control the reinforcements they receive unrelated to their own behaviour.

Empowerment learning and problem-solving abilities are important assets for any organization wishing to reach its full potential, and empowerment stimulates work excitement. The variable of learning is a consistently valuable contributor to work excitement and learning is positively correlated to work excitement.

Work characteristics and work behaviour
A lot of work excitement and learning depends on the work characteristics. This involves three psychological states: the meaningfulness of the work performed, responsibility for work outcomes, and knowledge of the results of the work performed. These states generally bring about positive work outcomes.

Work characteristics comprise five dimensions; namely, task identity, skill variety, task significance, autonomy and feedback. These dimensions may develop burnout. Examining the influence of LOC on work-related behaviour, Spector's metanalysis concluded that high internality was related to high levels of job satisfaction, commitment, involvement, and performance, as well as to low levels of absenteeism, strain, and distress (Spector, 1986).

Control and Communication
An individual's LOC (Rotter, 1966), often referred to as **control orientation**, is said to act as a perceptual filter when determining the extent to which an individual perceives control over rewards and costs when in communication with others. Thus, though initially learned from an individual's experiences, the perception of control, either high or low, over life events becomes ingrained over time, thus becoming trait-like.

Past research indicates that individuals guided by a more internal LOC have increased persuasive ability in interaction (Arnston, Mortensen, & Lustig, 1980) and are driven by their own sense of accomplishment. They tend to be more achievement and relationship

driven and perceive communication to be more satisfactory due to his or her sense of command over the situation. Essentially, as LOC becomes more internal, motivation to communicate increases, while anxiety toward communication with others decreases.

By contrast, external LOC refers to the idea that the course of life events depends largely on circumstances outside one's personal control (Levenson, 1981). In terms of interpersonal communication, research has found that those guided by an external LOC are less able to initiate or control conversation (Arnston et al., 1980) are affiliative yet have a reduced need to seek out information, engage in more face-saving behaviours compared to internals (Avtgis & Brenders, 1994), demonstrate less goal directed behaviour, seek out communication as an escape and believe that others are less honest with them in conversation.

Research in this field also indicates that those with more internal LOC are competent communicators, in that they demonstrate motivation to seek out relationships and commit increased effort to achieve relational satisfaction compared to individuals who have more of an external LOC (Brenders, 1987). Conversely, those with more external LOC, who perceive outside sources as chiefly responsible for controlling life events, are perceived as less competent communicators (Avtgis & Rancer, 1997).

LOC and Stress

LOC is one of the most important factors with a significant role in stress management and increase or decrease negative emotions, notably in the work environment with many occupational consequences. One of the impacts of the stress is burn out.

Job burnout is defined as "the syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of others, and a feeling of reduced personal accomplishment". Thus, burnout is not only a personal problem but rather, it is a social/environmental problem related to a person's work or environment.

A complex interaction between individual characteristics and issues in the work environment greatly affect burnout and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) confirmed that burnout is predicted by elements of job demand. Empirical evidences showed substantial issues concerned with burnout in terms of more costs for both organizations and individuals. In addition, high turnover rates, employee absenteeism, low levels of organizational commitment and decreased productivity found that burnout negatively affects job involvement.

Time constraint and Role have contributed to the burnout in an organisational setting.

Time constraint

Raghunathan, (1991) noted that time pressures can cause dysfunctional behaviour). According to him the number of quality reduction acts increases significantly when there is time pressure. Tight budgets can also affect perceptions of personal competence. For example, dysfunctional behaviour could occur if a time-budget overrun is perceived as being caused by a personal inefficiency or a tight budget.

Role stress
Role Stress has been defined in terms of a misfit between person's skills & abilities and the demands of his/her role. In other words, it occurs when divergence exists between what a person perceives to be the role expectations and what actually is occurring within the role. In this connection, there is a crucial role that managers and leaders play in an organisation.

Role of Managers and Leaders
With respect to personality dimensions, it has been observed that managers who reported themselves to be more neurotic but less extroverted or conscientious used more non-confrontational (i.e., avoiding) tactics. On the other hand, managers who were more open, extroverted, and less neurotic, preferred a more confrontational, straightforward approach to conflict. Managers who scored high on agreeableness, openness and neuroticism were more likely to use compromise as a conflict strategy, while those who scored low on agreeableness preferred control strategies.

In organizational settings it was found that leaders tend to be driven by internal LOC and were reportedly more task and instrumentally oriented, while those with more of an external LOC relied more on socio-emotional characteristics (e.g., perceived affinity, immediacy, affect) during interaction (Avtgis & Brogan, 1999). They found that that employees across a variety of work environments who reported having work-specific external LOC were less satisfied with co-workers, supervisors and top management, and perceived themselves as being less influential in the organization.

Those with more internal LOC could be likely to compromise or collaborate during conflict. Based on past research (Brenders, 1987), those who scored high on internal LOC commit more effort to satisfying relationships, tend to be leaders, and, overall, are perceived as competent communicators. Thus, it would stand to reason that those with high internal LOC would be less likely to exert overt control over and/or avoid superiors, and more likely be motivated to discuss interpersonal conflict with supervisors with the intent of finding mutually satisfying solutions.

individuals with higher external LOC would report use of non-confrontational strategies, while those with more internal LOC would report use of confrontational (i.e., approach) strategies. Further, those with more internal LOC reported use of solution-oriented strategies and, in turn, those with more external LOC reported less use of solution-oriented strategies. In regard to the work place, researchers contend that managers of organizations must be cognizant of the fact that regardless of context, individual personality traits may be highly predictive of certain conflict strategies. How one manages conflict is connected to individual communication competence (Canary, Cunningham & Cody, 1988) and as several researchers assert, interpersonal conflict, especially in organizational settings, is inevitable. Before we understand how to manage stress, let us then understand the nature of stress in the work environment.

Stress and Stress Management
Job stress is defined as an employee's awareness or feeling of personal dysfunction as a result of perceived conditions or happenings in the workplace, and the employee's psychological and physiological reactions caused by these uncomfortable, undesirable, or threats in the employee's immediate workplace environment (Montgomery et al., 1996). Stress is taken to be a physical, mental or emotional reaction resulting from the subject's response to environmental tensions, conflicts, pressures and similar stimuli, and is the result

of an imbalance between demands and the adaptive capacities of the mind and body (Fontana, 1989).

When an individual perceives that they are in control of a situation the probability is that he will be less likely to perceive the situation as threatening or stress-inducing. Research proves associations among overall stress, LOC and nonwork stress like environmental stressors such as finances or parenting. Externality (i.e., more fate, chance, luck, or powerful others oriented) is positively correlated with general life stress (DiMatteo et al. 1993) and job stress (Evans, 1992). Since internal-locus-of-control individuals ("internals") experience lower anxiety. Internal LOC may act as a stress buffer. It has been experimentally proven that people who report a more external LOC also report more concurrent and future stressful experiences and higher levels of psychological and physical problems. These people are also more vulnerable to external influences and as a result they become more responsive to stress.

Some individuals are either not affected by or thrive in an environment of stress. While more internally-oriented individuals are challenged by stressors, externals are more likely to be threatened by these stressors (Vitaliano et al. 1987). One's sense of LOC affects the degree of perceived stress.

By contrast, internal LOC has been shown to be positively associated with job satisfaction and lower perceived stress (Rees and Cooper, 1992). This is because internals feel they have input into their work environment, perceive less emotional exhaustion, and receive higher job satisfaction (Fuqua and Couture, 1986).

Karasek's research found work-related stress occurred most often when both low decision latitude and high job demands exceeded workers' coping resources, leading to a narrowed search for stress reduction methods (Karasek, 1979). Research work over the past 20 years or more has shown that the experience of stress in the workplace has undesirable consequences both for the health and safety of individuals and for the well-being of their organizations.

Stress and Conflict Management
How an individual approaches interpersonal conflict can be influenced by **contextual factors** as well as **personality traits.** There is the social learning effect or influence of contextual dimensions such as power inequalities in organizations (Burgoon, Berger & Waldron, 2000) and thus there is a growing need of understanding the moderating role and coping strategies to handle stress.

Moderating role and LOC
LOC has been found to moderate the relationship between job insecurity and many work consequences, such as strain, performance and organizational citizenship behaviour.

When confronted with quantitative job insecurity, internals generally take responsibility and attribute the threats to themselves. The externals, however, fail to recognize their own problems and tend to blame the organization or other employees. Internals experience less organizational injustice and dissatisfaction than externals. Further, internals believe that they can avoid being laid off by behaving better, whereas externals usually feel incapable of making any changes and give up easily (Spector, 1982); thus, internals cope with threats more positively than externals do.

Coping Strategies

How individuals deal with stress (i.e., cope with the stress in their lives) also affects their perceptions of stress. As an example, while internal-locus-of-control individuals use solution-oriented coping, external-locus-of-control individuals tend to either ignore or to give in to problems (Rees and Cooper, 1992).

Thus, persons who believe that events in their lives are contingent on their own actions are perhaps more prone to actively seek consultations with others and seek to change existing policy (i.e., help-seeking) when they perceive that their job outcomes do not accurately reflect their abilities and efforts. When under stress, such persons may also be likely to generate positive self-statements (i.e., positive thinking) in order to maintain or increase feelings of mastery and perseverance.

Coping methods vary in their effectiveness. Broadly there are two approaches:

- **Problem-focused coping -** This has been linked with better physical and psychological health as well as stronger feelings of efficacy and satisfaction.
- **Emotion focused coping** has been related to greater depression, stress, exhaustion, and depersonalization (Bhagat, Allie, & Ford, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Job stress has been noted as an increasing problem for employees in Western industrialised societies, particularly the US (e.g. Sauter & Murphy, 1995). It has been argued that almost all job stress research and theories were developed and empirically tested in Western industrialised countries (Xie, 1996). Researchers have been applying the same theories of job stress with reference to the LOC for Asian studies, which are specifically meant for western societies.

With respect to the Indian work environment, a lot of localised research needs to be focused to understand the personality and organisational dimensions of stress and the impact on the coping strategies.

The IT sector in India has seen unprecedented rise of stress due to various factors. A study on the personality dimensions of the employee would give localised insight into the psyche of the locus of control in handling stress.

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