Is There a Relationship Between Work Locus of Control and Interpersonal Conflict at Work

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Abstract- Businesses are always looking for ways to increase their competitive edge which is why much attention is directed toward an individual's functioning and how it can affect organizational functioning. Interpersonal conflict can greatly impact how an individual functions (Rispens & Demerouti, 2016). Conflict can reduce productivity through decreased communication, time spent to resolve the conflict, and employees focusing on conflict rather than accomplishing their duties. This research study will examine if there is a correlation between work locus of control and perceived interpersonal conflict. How an employee interprets work events-work locus of control contributes to how they function. Individuals are said to possess an internal or external locus of control. The construct is measured on a continuum. A survey completed using convenience snowball sampling was used to measure attitudes and beliefs in the workplace. A total of nine constructs were measured using scales proven to be reliable and valid. The sample used in this study consisted of 871 respondents. Results indicate a slight positive correlation. If employers can find ways to decrease interpersonal conflict and the negative consequences associated with it, they can improve their organization's effectiveness and productivity.

Index Terms- Counterproductive work behavior, emotional intelligence, perceived interpersonal conflict, work locus of control

I. INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that technology, advances in transportation, and a more mobile population have connected the world. As businesses become more global and competitive, it is important to help employees perform at their best. Industrial/Organizational psychologists are concerned with improving the overall functioning of the work world. Their goal is to analyze the current functioning of a work environment and make recommendations to increase success and performance levels. This might be accomplished by increasing the rate at which work is performed, increasing the quality of work performed, or helping an employee function in a more productive way. This paper will examine the relationship of two constructs, perceived interpersonal conflict and work locus of control. Identification of strategies to minimize interpersonal conflict is one way to reduce loss, thereby increasing profit, the ultimate goal of businesses.

There are very few occupations that do not require interaction with others to accomplish the tasks of the position. These interactions between individuals often lead to interpersonal conflict, referred to as interpersonal conflict at work (ICW). Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. (2008) presented a report on workplace conflict that gathered information from nine countries. A staggering 85% of employees report dealing with interpersonal conflict. Those who answered that they dealt with conflict always or frequently was 29%. US employees were found to spend an average of 2.8 hours a week dealing with conflict. In terms of dollars, that's $359 billion in paid hours for the year 2008. This does not take into account the absences that 25% reported taking to avoid workplace conflict (Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 2008).

Julian Rotter (1966) is credited with developing the idea of locus of control within his social learning theory. In simple terms, locus of control refers to how one perceives events and their personal relationship to these events. Locus of control is split into internal and external. A person with an external locus of control feels they have little control over events that happen in their life. A person with an internal locus of control views life events as a function of the decisions they have made. It should be noted this construct is measured on a continuum (Rotter, 1966). Paul Spector developed a scale that measures the construct of locus of control as it specifically relates to work. This scale is referred to as the Work Locus of Control Scale, (Spector, 1988).

The research that is available often lumps interpersonal conflict in with other work behaviors that are viewed as negative (Jaramillo et al., 2011). The literature reviewed dealing with work locus of control seems to concentrate on job performance and or job satisfaction (Shannack & Al-Taher, 2012; Rizeanu, 2016; Chen & Silverthorne, 2008). Or locus of control is used in relationship to overall negative behaviors (Turnispeed, 2018; Sprung & Jex, 2012). There was some research that examined interpersonal conflict as a part of the emotional intelligence construct (Greenidge, 2014; Moeller & Kwantes, 2015). It is hoped this paper will contribute to the literature in advancing the knowledge base of how to best achieve a highly functioning work environment with minimal negative features that are counterproductive to the success of the organization.

Interpersonal conflict has many negative effects. When psychological stress is experienced, it can have physical effects. Muscatell et al. (2015) in researching the neural activity that is associated with inflammation found both increased neural

activity and increase in inflammation were associated with stress (Muscatell et al., 2015). Research completed by Girardi et al. (2015) studied the effects that ICW had on biomarkers of inflammation. Results indicate that work-related stress is likely associated with inflammation (Girardi et al.,2015). A study conducted by Narayanan, Menon, and Spector (1999) used an open-ended technique to examine stressful incidents for three different occupations: clerical workers, university professors, and sales associates. Participants from all three of the occupations studied reported interpersonal conflict at work as a stressor. Sales associates and university professors reported interpersonal conflict at work as a major stressor, (Narayanan et al., 1999). Jaramillo, Mulki, and Boles (2011) conducted an empirical literature review to look more closely at the effects of interpersonal conflict on organizational outcomes. They chose to use data collected using salespeople specifically because salespeople tend to have more interpersonal interactions, needing to interact not only with customers, but members of their sales team as well. Role stress was found to significantly affect work overload perception which led to higher interpersonal conflict. They reported interpersonal conflict significantly impacted emotional exhaustion, even after the direct impact of role stress on emotional exhaustion was controlled (Jamarillo, et al., 2011). Meier, Semmer and Gross (2014) conducted a study in Switzerland. Their goal was to examine the moderating effect that depressive symptoms would have on interpersonal conflict and an individual's well-being. Included in the study were indicators of both physical and psychological well-being. Their results were based on two studies: cross-sectional (n=218) and a two-week diary study (n=127). After analysis, they determined that conflict was related to both physical and psychological symptoms of impairment, (Meier et al., 2014). When individuals with little social support experienced social stressors over several months, depressive symptoms were found to increase, (Dorman & Zapf, 1999). Research conducted on the effects of interpersonal conflict completed by Ilies, Johnson, Judge, and Keeney (2011) found short-term negative effects on emotion related to interpersonal conflict at work (Ilies et al., 2011). Meir, Gross, Spector, and Semmer (2013) reported a negative effect on emotions related to interpersonal conflict at work as well (Meir et al., 2013).

The occurrence of ICW is set to increase. The movement toward decentralization and fewer organizational layers, increased diversity, and a growing need to coordinate work activities makes the work environment ripe for increased conflict, (Dijkstra, Beersma, & Cornelissen, 2012). In researching the moderating effects of coping mechanisms on the relationship between negative emotion and work performance, Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla (2005) found that performance was affected by emotion (Brown et al. 2005).

There is an abundance of research regarding stress associated with work; much of it focuses on identifying the elements that have a moderating effect on stressors and allow the individual to limit his or her focus on the negative results associated with it (Rispens & Demerouti, 2016; Sprung & Jex, 2012). Most of the research can be placed in one of two categories; those aimed at identifying the traits one possesses (Moeller & Kwantes, 2015; Ilies et al., 2010) and those aimed at identifying strategies that will reduce the stress (Brown et al.; Wright et al., 2015).

Eschleman, Bowling, and LaHuis (2015) is just one example of research that examines the moderating effects of personality. They found that low-agreeableness was related to higher levels of counterproductive work behavior when work stressors (interpersonal conflict and organizational constraint) were increased, (Eschleman et al., 2015).

Conflict detachment is an example of a coping tactic. Rispens and Demerouti (2016) completed a study that looked at the effect that conflict detachment had on an individual's response to conflict. They base their theorizing on previous research by Sonnenetag and Fritz (2007) and Sonnentag and Bayer (2005). Rispens and Demerouti hypothesized that the ability to psychologically detach from the conflict would moderate the negative emotions induced by the conflict. This hypothesis was supported by their results (Rispens & Demerouti, 2016). Studying locus of control and the ability to detach would be worthy of future research.

A study conducted by Norris and Niebuhr (1984) looked at the role that locus of control played on job satisfaction and job performance. They utilized information gathered from 116 respondents working in the engineering department of a medium-sized industrial company. All participants held a technical position. It's interesting to note that of the 116 respondents, 106 were male. It is unclear if the results were skewed by a predominantly male sample. Levels of job performance and job satisfaction did not significantly differ between those with an internal locus of control and those with an external locus of control. But those with an internal locus of control showed a more significant relationship between job satisfaction and job performance (Norris & Niebuhr, 1984).

Work locus of control is an aspect of personality that has been demonstrated to effect organizational behavior. An internal locus of control leads employees to believe more powerfully than externals that their behavior will have influence. Those who possess a more internal locus of control are more likely to engage in political behavior. They are better able to control their behavior (Shannack & Al-Taher, 2012). Mohapatra and Gupta (2010) found a significant correlation between locus of control and emotionally intelligent behaviors in managers (Mohapatra & Gupta, 2010).

Rizeanu (2016) conducted a study that looked at stress, emotional intelligence, and locus of control as predictors of work satisfaction. Participants were 110 students in psychology at a university in Bucharest. The students completed several specialized instruments that measured stress, emotional intelligence, locus of control, and work satisfaction independently. By using a stepwise multiple regression, it was found that while stress and emotional intelligence predicted job satisfaction at a relatively significant level. W,hen locus of control was added to stress and emotional intelligence as predictive factors of job satisfaction, the predictive value for job satisfaction increased, (Rizeanu, 2016).

In an overall effort to provide an education that would improve social work student's ability to be successful and the likelihood a social worker would remain in a public agency, the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) initiated a study. Social workers in a public agency are faced with several challenges and display a high turnover. They must provide services to meet the needs of their clients while adhering to strict

policies and ensuring children are protected. They must determine how scarce resources are to be distributed. Fitzgerald and Clark (2013) focused on work locus of control as a construct that would influence how social workers reacted to these stressors, noting that some seemed to thrive in this environment. Their research generally supported their hypotheses regarding social workers with an external locus of control. They placed less emphasis on employment outcomes, felt less responsible for client outcomes, and tended to perceive their part in positive outcomes as unrelated to their own job performance (Fitzgerald & Clark, 2013, p59).

Interested in researching the moderating effect of work locus of control on work stressors and counterproductive work behavior (CWB), Sprung and Jex (2012) designed a research study. They studied 191 working adults. The sample came from different occupations. They found employees possessing an internal locus of control had a weaker relationship with organizational constraints and CWB, (Sprung & Jex, 2012). In looking at how employees use CWBs as a coping strategy, Shoss, Jundt, Kobler, and Reynolds, (2016) found that locus of control had a predictive value in determining if a CWB would be an effective coping mechanism. CWBs were seen to be an effective coping strategy at a higher rate for those with an external locus of control than for those with an internal locus of control, (Shoss et al., 2016). Utilizing healthcare workers, Dijkstra, Beersma, and Evers (2011) examined internal locus of control as a moderating factor between conflict-related strain and problem-solving strategy. They found that internal locus of control did have a moderating effect on these two variables. In addition, they found people with an internal locus of control were more likely to use some type of conflict management strategy, thus reducing the strain induced by the conflict, (Dijkstra, Beersma, & Evers, 2011). Interested in the relationship between emotional intelligence, work values, and internal locus of control, Mohapatra and Gupta (2010) hypothesized that emotionally intelligent managers will have high work values and high internal locus of control. It was confirmed by their study. Additionally, they found internal locus of control correlated significantly with self-managing and utilization of emotions, as well as social skills (Mohapatra & Gupta, 2010). By showing a relationship between work locus of control and interpersonal conflict, further strategies can be employed to help employees achieve an internal locus of control.

Method

Participants

Subjects were recruited using convenience sampling via emails and social media. The purpose of the survey was to assess attitudes and beliefs related to work. With that in mind, students asked that participants be 18 years old and have some work experience. The survey was posted online in English, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese. A total of 1686 respondents completed the survey. Deletions were made to the raw date based on participant age, inappropriate responses, and issues with the measurement scales when translated into languages other than English. After all deletions, only the data obtained from the survey in English was used for this study, giving a total sample of 871. This study was part of a larger study.

Materials

Materials utilized consisted of an electronic way to access the survey and the survey itself. Participants were asked to complete the survey online, as well as forward the survey link to others. The survey, first obtained demographic information: age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, number of children, current highest level of education, category of current position, employment status, number of years at current job, annual income, number of incomes in household, racial identity, and ethnic identity. Participants were asked to provide information related to nine different constructs. All constructs were measured using scales that have been validated and demonstrated reliability.

Locus of control was measured using Spector's abbreviated eight item Likert scale (Spector, 1988). Possible responses were disagree very much, disagree moderately, disagree slightly, agree slightly, agree moderately, and agree very much. The appropriate scores were reversed per Spector's scale instructions. Higher scores on this scale indicate a more external work locus of control. Interpersonal Conflict at Work was measured using Spector's four item Likert scale (Spector & Jex, 1998). Higher scores on this scale indicate someone who perceives more interpersonal conflict. Possible responses were strongly disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree or disagree, slightly agree, and strongly agree.

Results

Of the 871 respondents used, 551 were females, 316 were males, and the remaining answered with prefer not to answer or transgender. Because the pretest check of normality was not met for ICW, the Spearman correlation was used. A slight positive correlation (r=.214) that is statistically significant, $p < .0001$ was found. One limitation is that data collected relied on self-reporting.

Conclusion

Our world is becoming ever more connected through technology, modernization of travel, and the fact that many live and work outside their native country. Businesses are always concerned about the bottom line-how much profit can be made. Taken collectively, research examining organizational functioning has demonstrated that how well an individual functions has an impact on organizational outcomes. Organizations interested in improving their employees' functioning are beginning to provide training to address not only technical skills needed to perform duties, but those that will help lead to a positive work environment and positive work behaviors. This study contributes to the research that work locus of control influences employees' behaviors and perceptions. Further research into ways to increase one's locus of control would be beneficial to the field of industrial/organizational psychology. Teaching employees to utilize a more internal locus of control can reduce counterproductive work behaviors and increase positive outcomes.

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