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Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement: A Review of the Locus of Control Construct

Martin B. Kormanik¹ and Tonette S. Rocco²

Abstract

One aspect of personality, perceptions of internal versus external control of reinforcement, shifts under conditions of change. This review of the literature examines the relationship between planned organizational change and locus of control. The review includes literature from the disciplines of clinical and social psychology, adult development, education and learning theory, business and management, and human resource development (HRD). The discussion closes with implications for HRD theory building, research, and practice.

Keywords

locus of control, planned organizational change, self-efficacy

“In ambiguous or loosely structured situations personality variables are quite important in their effects on behavior” (Davis & Phares, 1967, p. 558). One aspect of personality, perceptions of internal versus external control of reinforcement, shifts under conditions of change. The expectation is that with organizational change, workers suffer from a sense of helplessness and loss of control over their environment. In the current economic climate, newscasters talk of a recession. Organizations are downsizing, laying off, firing, reducing work hours and pay, and implementing hiring freezes. This volatile environment changes workplace dynamics. The uncertainty places pressure on employees to increase productivity while suffering from a sense of helplessness (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007). This sense of helplessness decreases congruency “between the employee’s values and interests and those of the organization” and decreases workplace commitment (Fornes, Rocco, & Wollard, 2008, p. 347) and can also reduce individual performance and productivity. Reductions in

¹OD Systems, Alexandria, Virginia
²Florida International University, Miami

Corresponding Author:
Martin B. Kormanik, OD Systems, 1200 Prince Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 Email: mkormanik@odsystems.com
performance and productivity are often addressed through interventions designed by HRD professionals meant to improve performance, organizational effectiveness, and facilitate planned organizational change (J. W. Gilley, Eggland, & Maycunich Gilley, 2002).

The purpose of this review of the literature on employee perceptions of locus of control is to examine the relationship between planned organizational change and locus of control. The review includes literature that either directly or indirectly addresses the locus of control construct. Clinical psychologists seeking to address patients’ helplessness and lack of confidence, social psychologists inquiring into attribution processes, and learning theorists interested in investigating fear and stress have all contributed to the locus of control literature. Consequently, the review includes several academic disciplines: clinical and social psychology, adult development, education and learning theory, business and management, and human resource development (HRD). There were few articles published in the Academy of HRD (AHRD) journals that directly addressed locus of control in terms of roles and responsibilities of HRD professionals during planned organizational change. The following sections provide a description of the method, an overview of the locus of control construct, application of the construct, and a discussion of locus of control and planned change in contemporary organizations.

**Method**

As there is no prescribed way to conduct and structure a literature review (Merriam & Simpson, 2000), this integrative literature review followed the guidelines suggested by Torraco (2005). The collection of articles were gathered in three steps: a search of seminal works on locus of control, a search of works linking locus of control and organizational change, and a search of HRD journals linking locus of control and planned organizational change.

First, a seminal works audit sought primary sources rather than secondary ones (Krathwohl, 1998). The process involved cascading back in the literature to seminal thinkers on the locus of control construct. The process started by accessing the literature through common search engines (e.g., ProQuest, EBSCOhost, OvidSP) using relevant keywords (e.g., locus of control, internal versus external control of reinforcement). Limiting the search to scholarly journals and full text articles written prior to 2000, the search produced 886 articles. The seminal audit sought literature foundational to the topic rather than to create a comprehensive review. Given HRD’s multidisciplinary nature, the seminal works audit of the locus of control construct culled research from a variety of disciplines (e.g., adult development, business, education, nursing, psychology, sociology). After categorizing the articles, several articles were chosen from each discipline to reflect the development of thought and application of the construct. Common sources were identified from the articles’ reference lists. Authority of the author, relevance to the study, and quality of the source are criteria for evaluating a source (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). All three criteria were used in selecting the literature in this review.
The second step of this review synthesized the seminal literature on locus of control with contemporary literature on organizational change. This second component involved accessing the literature through the same search engines using relevant keywords (e.g., locus of control, organizational change). The third step of this review involved a search of the Academy of HRD journals. This search was limited to recent (i.e., 1999-2009) articles in the HRD journals (i.e., HRD Quarterly, HRD International, HRD Review, and Advances in Developing Human Resources). The search terms used were locus of control, planned organizational change, organizational change, and planned change. This search identified 36 articles that included the term locus of control. Of these 36 articles, one included planned organizational change, 18 articles included organizational change, and four included planned change. Most of the 36 articles included only an incidental reference to locus of control. The 7 articles having a substantive discussion of the locus of control construct are included in this review.

An integrative review should move beyond mere description of the literature to a synthesis with a sense of purpose (Neuman, 2000). Three goals guided the review: (a) to provide an overview, define the construct, and describe its genesis; (b) to understand application of the construct; and (c) to examine the construct’s relationship to planned organizational change. While examining the literature to address these goals, several themes emerged. As the goal to provide an overview was met, two predetermined themes formed: the genesis of the construct and its definition. In addition, two other themes emerged, problems with the conceptualization of the construct and measuring locus of control. The themes under application of the construct include changes in locus of control orientation, locus of control and the life course, locus of control and critical events, and locus of control in the workplace context. The themes under the third goal are change in contemporary organizations and planned organizational change and locus of control. Thematic analysis of the selected literature enabled a synthesis of the seminal work on locus of control with the modern discipline of HRD’s concern for organizational development, organizational change, performance improvement, and workplace learning (J. W. Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Swanson, 1995).

Overview of the Construct

Locus of control is the contemporary term for the concept of internal versus external control of reinforcement developed out of social learning theory (Lefcourt, 1972). This overview of the construct situates the construct in social learning theory, examines the definitions of locus of control, identifies problems with the conceptualization of the construct, and highlights measurement issues.

Social Learning Theory

Rotter (1954) defined social learning theory in a seminal text on clinical psychology. The idea of continuous learning and making meaning within a collective context through
interaction with one’s environment is embodied within social learning theory. The premise of social learning theory is that an individual’s actions are predicted on the basis of the individual’s expectations for reinforcement, the perceived value of the reinforcement, and the situation in which the individual finds himself or herself. Reinforcement “acts to strengthen an expectancy that a particular behavior or event will be followed by the reinforcement in the future” (Rotter, 1966, p. 2). Expectancy is equal to the value of the reinforcement (Lefcourt, 1976). Expectancy requires that the individual value the outcome, have self-efficacy, understand and trust the reward system, and avoid negative or unacceptable outcomes (Lawler, 1973).

Although Rotter’s social learning theory attempted to integrate stimulus-response and cognitive interactionist learning theories, Rotter is more commonly viewed as a leading contributor to the study of linear cognitive interaction (Bigge & Shermis, 1992). Perhaps this view is based on Rotter’s notable emphasis on the cognitive-field interactionist learning theory of Lewin (1951), rather than Skinner’s (1938) conditioning through reinforcement. Several researchers (Gurin & Brim, 1984) have made substantial connections between Rotter’s work on locus of control and the self-efficacy work of Bandura (1977), also in the cognitive interactionist family. Other investigators have suggested moving the locus of control construct away from Skinnerian (i.e., stimulus response) thinking entirely, arguing that “man must come to be more effective and able to perceive himself as the determiner of his fate if he is to live comfortably with himself” (Lefcourt, 1976, p. 3).

Hultsch and Plemons (1979) proposed a metamodel as a framework for discussing theory and research on life events. Their primarily organismic metamodel attempted a synthesis of the behaviorist and cognitivist approach, similar to the cognitive-oriented eclectic theory of learning supported by Bandura (1977) and Bigge and Shermis (1992). Interestingly, Hultsch and Plemons’s unconventional approach echoed Rotter’s (1954) social learning theory, though his seminal work on locus of control is not cited.

**Locus of Control Defined**

Building on the precepts of social learning theory, Rotter (1966) provided grounded theory on the locus of control construct in a discussion of generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. Rotter conceptualized locus of control as a predisposition in the perception of what causes reinforcement (i.e., reward, favorable outcome, goal accomplishment). A predisposition for internal locus of control (i.e., internality) results from the perception that reinforcement is contingent on one’s own behavior or one’s own relatively permanent characteristics or traits. Perception that reinforcement is due to luck, chance, fate, or factors beyond one’s control indicates an external locus of control (i.e., externality).

A slightly different perspective on the concept of internal versus external control of reinforcement was provided by Lefcourt (1976): “In being forced to hear predictable noise we may stop work and wait until it ceases, or steel ourselves for the onset,
minimizing our own responses to the noise. We are not as helpless as we might otherwise be since we can do something to minimize the impact of the predictable noise. It is this perception of the ability ‘to do something’ that gives rise to the concept of perceived control” (p. 5). Perceived control is a generalized expectancy for internal control of reinforcement. Reactions to unpleasant stimuli are shaped by the individual’s perceptions of the stimuli and by the individual’s perceptions of ability to cope with the stimuli.

In the life-span development literature, Gurin and Brim (1984) provided yet another perspective on locus of control. Sense of control is a function of causal reasoning. Expectancy is a probability assessment, tied to causal questions. “Control over outcomes logically involves judging and analyzing two interrelated connections: that between the self and an act, and that between the act and an outcome” (p. 284). An individual understands that a certain condition results in a certain outcome, and the individual has or can produce the certain condition. Bandura (1977) defined this latter component as self-efficacy.

Cromwell, Rosenthal, Shakow, and Zahn (1961) appear to be the first to have used the term locus of control in reference to the construct of internal versus external control of reinforcement. Although hundreds of studies investigated the construct, it was not until the early 1970s that the term locus of control regularly appeared in the psychology literature. Another decade passed before the term locus of control entered common usage throughout the literature in reference to the construct of internal versus external control of reinforcement.

Interest in studying the locus of control construct began with problems encountered in individual psychotherapy, and the study of the locus of control construct as a personality variable (Joe, 1971; Lefcourt, 1976). Although Rotter’s initial theory focused on the individual as the unit of analysis, investigators have moved to identify generalized locus of control expectancies for certain populations, including patients (M. E. Jackson & Tessler, 1984; Ormel & Schaufeli, 1991), genders (Feather, 1967, 1968; Harrington, 1985), racial groups (Cain, 1994; Harrington, 1985; Trimble & Richardson, 1983), social or political action groups (Gurin & Brim, 1984; Thomas 1970), students (McLaughlin, 1977; Suls & Mullen, 1981), and the workforce (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Frost & Clayson, 1991; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Nelson, Cooper, & Jackson, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). These studies focused on such primary aspects of locus of control as self-efficacy (i.e., having the skills), self-esteem (i.e., having the confidence), autonomy (i.e., having dominion), and instrumentality (i.e., contributing to the outcome).

**Problems With the Conceptualization of the Construct**

Several reviews of the locus of control construct have been written (Joe, 1971; Lefcourt, 1966, 1972, 1976; Rotter, 1966). Each of these works reported some problems with the conceptualization of the locus of control construct. Rotter (1975) addressed several of the problems and misconceptions related to the construct of locus
of control, based on the publication of more than 600 studies since Rotter’s 1966 seminal work. The latter commentary cautioned that researchers should recognize limitations associated with the construct’s conceptualization. Generalized expectancies for locus of control reveal important personality characteristics yet only allow for broad, rather than specific, behavior predictions from limited data.

The confusion and misuse of the locus of control construct prompted Rotter (1975) to provide several clarifications. These included the need to maintain generalized expectancy, treat the value of the reinforcement variable as a separate variable, and avoid unidimensionality. The initial grounded theory centered on establishing generalized expectancy for internal versus external control of reinforcement. Some researchers, however, erroneously attempted to use the I-E scale to predict specific behaviors. Rotter reiterated that the theory allows prediction in a large number of different situations (i.e., generalized) but at a low level. A second area of clarification centered on the three variables in social learning theory: the individual’s expectations for reinforcement, the perceived value of the reinforcement, and the situation in which the individual finds himself or herself. Some researchers however failed to treat reinforcement value as a separate variable. Rotter suggested this was particularly important to consider in social action situations. A third area of clarification centered on the multidimensionality of the construct. Investigators were frequently referring to a subject’s unidimensionality, as internals or externals, with internals being viewed more favorably. Joe (1971) stressed the need to study locus of control at a multidimensional rather than unidimensional level. Rotter (1975) reiterated that the Internal–External (I-E) scale represented a multidimensional continuum, with an individual’s position on the continuum as dynamic and neither good nor bad.

Rotter’s (1954, 1966) initial conceptualization of the construct focused on control over reinforcement (i.e., goal attainment, outcome). Some investigators, on the other hand, have interpreted this conceptualization as control over the individual’s environment (Frost & Clayson, 1991). The latter perspective appears faulty. For example, one cannot control whether it is going to rain (i.e., environment), yet one can control how wet one gets in the downpour (i.e., outcome). Bandura (1977), and later Gurin and Brim (1984), provided some clarity on the interrelationship between locus of control and environment, noting that “the outcome expectancy which is the person’s estimate of the extent to which a particular behavior will lead to a desired outcome in [a] particular environment” (Gurin and Brim, 1984, p. 286).

**Measuring Locus of Control**

The three issues that Rotter (1975) addressed have consistently reappeared throughout the literature during the three decades since Rotter’s (1966) seminal work on locus of control. The issue of measurement of the construct has particularly been debated. Several investigators have developed instruments for measuring the construct as a variable. Lefcourt (1972) identified nine instruments for assessing locus of control and
cautioned using any of the scales with a discerning eye. Early instruments using a Likert-type format were discarded to reduce correlations to social desirability scales (Joe, 1971; Lefcourt, 1976).

A majority of the studies identified in this review used some derivation of Rotter’s (1966) 29-item Internal–External (I-E) scale. This forced-choice questionnaire assesses whether people believe that events are contingent on their own behavior or their own relatively permanent characteristics or traits (i.e., internal predisposition), or whether people believe that events are contingent on luck, chance, fate, or factors beyond their control (i.e., external predisposition). One point is given for each external response to a question; therefore the more points a respondent receives, the greater his or her perception of external locus of control. Frequently, this scale is reverse coded, resulting in higher scores equating to higher perceptions of internality (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Instruments using a forced-choice format (e.g., Rotter’s I-E scale; Reid-Ware Three-Factor I-E Scale) or a binomial format (e.g., Bialer’s Locus of Control Questionnaire), rather than Likert-type scales, have tended to be used more consistently by researchers (Lefcourt, 1976).

The multidimensionality aspect of the locus of control construct has continued to be a source of interest in the arena of measurement (Cain, 1994; Gurin, Gurin, & Morrison, 1978; Reid & Ware, 1974; Trimble & Richardson, 1983). Factor-analytic empirical research of Rotter’s 29-item scale has produced subscales with statistically significant criterion validity for measuring the locus of control construct (Joe, 1971; Lefcourt, 1972, 1976). Studies have shown Gurin et al.’s 13-item scale’s validity for measuring the core construct of internal versus external control of reinforcement (Greenberger, Strasser, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989; Howell & Avolio, 1993). Despite the debate, other studies have continued to use Rotter’s original I-E scale (Frost & Clayson, 1991).

Application of the Construct

Overall there appears to be broad interpretation regarding the meaning and application of the construct of locus of control. Two definitional themes emerged from the review. One theme focused on locus of control based on perceptions of self-efficacy (i.e., the individual has skills, the individual can “do it”). The second theme focused on reinforcement (i.e., expectations for outcome, cause–effect, the environment’s being responsive to coping efforts). These themes were evident in looking at changes in locus of control orientation in general, locus of control and the life course, locus of control and critical events, and locus of control in the workplace context.

Changes in Locus of Control Orientation

Rotter (1954) suggested that personality is a learned behavior, as compared to Jungian philosophy that considers personality a heritable characteristic. Change in locus of control orientation is therefore expected. One aspect of an individual’s personality is
the equilibrium between the individual’s drives for autonomy, control, and social acceptance. This equilibrium contributes to the individual’s locus of control orientation. Social learning theory suggests that locus of control orientation can change as a result of changes in reinforcement, the value of the reinforcement, or the situation itself. The implication is that an individual’s locus of control orientation will change with life’s experiences.

In the educational literature, McLaughlin (1977), drawing on Rotter (1966) and Lefcourt (1972), directly addressed the locus of control change in college students. McLaughlin suggested that one learning objective of the college experience is to develop a greater sense of autonomy and less dependence on external agents (e.g., parents, teachers). Consequently, higher education institutions should focus on increasing the student’s capacity for self-direction. The college experience should help students adapt or increase their internal locus of control.

Locus of Control and the Life Course

Rotter (1954) hypothesized an orientation toward externality in children and young adults by suggesting that “early acquired goals in humans . . . are entirely controlled by other people” (p. 100). Cain (1994) investigated locus of control as it relates to negotiating stages of adult development. The findings showed a consistent inclination toward internality over the life course, with a peak in internal locus of control during the midlife (i.e., 40-45) transition years.

In a discussion of socialization in the adult development literature, Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) proposed that “personal belief in the relevance and validity of social norms increases through the adult life span” (p. 716). This trend is particularly strong during middle age. Connection to a subsequent shift toward externality in locus of control was not specifically identified by Neugarten et al., yet one wonders if there is a relationship between the post-midlife drop in internality and age norm social pressures.

Degelman, Owens, Reynolds, and Riggs (1991) were unable to prove their hypothesis that older adults (i.e., more than 60) would be more external in locus of control than younger adults (college age), though they were able to show a statistically significant shift toward externality in female participants. Several other studies showed that females tend to have higher external scores (Feather, 1967, 1968). Interestingly, Rotter (1966) found no difference in generalized expectancies for males and females.

Locus of Control and Critical Events

The literature described in the previous section suggests that there is a relationship between locus of control and the life course and that the relationship is nonlinear. Furthermore, more rigorous studies directly addressing the issue are needed. Questions also remain as to the relationship between critical life events and locus of control.
Do critical events compromise locus of control orientation? Conversely, does an internal orientation mitigate the crisis of critical events?

In the adult development literature, Hultsch and Plemons (1979) indirectly linked their discussion of the life-span development component of adult development theory to the construct of locus of control. The authors proposed a metamodel as a framework for discussing theory and research on life events, suggesting that a change in perceptions of personal control is a developmental outcome of life events. After an initial appraisal of the threat posed by a life event, any dissonance one feels represents a loss of the sense of control. Resolution of the life event involves re-creating congruity with one’s environment (i.e., shifting the locus of control).

Similarly, in the social psychology literature, Suls and Mullen (1981) discuss the concepts of perceived control and desirability in two studies of college students. At issue in both studies were the attributes of life change events that increase the risk of future psychological distress. The results of both studies “suggest that such attributes of life change events as uncontrollability and undesirability in combination may increase the risk of subsequent psychological distress” (p. 386). In point, perception of a lack of control over undesirable life events correlated with psychological illness.

In the psychology literature, Flannery (1986) looked directly at the issue of personal control as a moderator variable of life stress. Using Rotter’s (1966) I-E scale, the study examined the relationship between expectations for outcome (i.e., the environment will be responsive to individual coping efforts) and efficacy (i.e., the belief that one can do the task) and the dependent variables of anxiety and depression. Depression in men had a significant negative correlation with the measure of internal locus of control. The findings suggested that the less internal control an individual perceives, the greater the likelihood for depression.

Cain (1994) took a Levinsonian approach in examining shifts of locus of control among African Americans, and in particular the impact of racism on locus of control. The data showed that racism did not adversely affect the subjects’ sense of internal versus external control, or that study participants tended to not blame any lack of opportunity, accomplishment, or success on a system of institutionalized racism. Qualitative data augmenting the statistical analysis suggested “an unabiding awareness of racism; yet, an over-riding motivation and drive to take charge of one’s life in spite of racism” (p. 170). Also, the male cohort in Cain’s study showed a higher tendency to vacillate between internality and externality. Cain found that tasks and situations, rather than specific developmental stages, have a greater impact on locus of control. Both these conclusions support the multidimensional possibilities of locus of control.

**Locus of Control in the Workplace Context**

Nelson et al. (1995) found that the issue of control becomes relevant only “when an event is of significant magnitude to make uncertainty a source of general concern” (p. 68). Their data suggested that the upheaval of reorganization caused an increase in
employees’ externality. Conversely, Frost and Clayson (1991) failed to show that locus of control is affected by the critical event of unemployment.

Hershey (1972) indicated a psychological application of the locus of control construct in reporting an industry study of the effects of anticipated job loss on employee behavior. Conventional wisdom suggests that management should notify employees of a pending layoff at the last possible moment, to minimize the response of dysfunctional employee behavior. The findings showed no difference in behavior of employees notified at an earlier time. Although locus of control was not the primary focus of the study, the article provided an indirect link to the construct. Hershey concluded that knowledge of an imminent layoff allows employees to take control, or at least maintain a sense of control of their lives (i.e., gain a greater sense of internal control).

Conger and Kanungo (1988) identified two different approaches to the development of the empowerment construct—relational and motivational. Empowerment as a relational construct occurs through movement toward participative management, where organizational decision making is shifted to lower levels for inclusion of a larger number of employees. Empowerment as a motivational construct occurs when management enables employees by helping employees perceive they have power and control. The authors suggested that empowerment as a motivational construct involves creating “expectancy belief-states that are internal to individuals” (p. 473). This expectancy belief is derived straight from the construct of locus of control.

Conger and Kanungo’s theory on empowerment provided the framework for Thomas and Velthouse’s (1990) refinement of the cognitive elements of empowerment: sense of impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice. Both Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) draw heavily on Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy work. All these investigators use the foundation of Rotter’s (1966) description of generalized expectancies for locus of control.

Adler (1994) provided an examination of the efficacy of personality tests for sales force selection. This literature review reported that locus of control is a personality trait having moderate but significantly generalizable correlation with sales performance. Adler cited Spiro and Weitz (1990) and Hough (1991), which both link back to the earlier work of Rotter (1966).

Continuing in the management literature, Hayes (1994) described the development and validation of the Employee Empowerment Questionnaire (EEQ), a survey instrument for measuring individual perceptions of empowerment. The empirical data showed that the EEQ measures empowerment by examining employee “perceptions of the work environment, their level of self-efficacy, or their perception of authority to act” (p. 43). These three concepts are embodied in the construct of locus of control. Hayes cited Conger and Kanungo (1988), which links back to Rotter’s seminal work.

**Planned Organizational Change**

Planned change in organizations generally has three elements: a defined future direction and goals, established criteria to measure successful goal achievement, and goals
and criteria to measure goal attainment for continued future progress (Kauffman, 2000). Planned change can take many forms such as downsizing, mergers, acquisitions, systems reengineering, and culture change. This section starts with a discussion of the context of change in contemporary organizations, followed by a discussion linking planned organizational change to employee perceptions of locus of control.

**Change in Contemporary Organizations**

Lundberg (1989) stated that “for any organization to perform, to deal with the multiplicity of ongoing problems and issues, to adapt to environmental changes, to survive and prosper, implies that it must learn” (p. 1). Organizational learning implies change, or at least change in the range of potential behaviors (Huber, 1991). Change may be unplanned, as “unattended accumulation of change pressures can often result in an abrupt crises” or a radical wrenching change” (Smith, 1995, p. 77). Alternatively, organizations and their leadership may initiate planned change.

The business and management literature show that planned change efforts in organizations have been substantial during the past two decades. Bell (1973) and Coates, Jarratt, and Mahaffie (1989) suggested that the shift from a manufacturing and industrial economy to an economy based on information and knowledge-based goods and services would drive change. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration commissioned two studies of trends in the work and the workers in the United States (Johnson, 1988; Johnston & Packer, 1987). Both studies highlighted workforce demographic changes into the 21st century that would drive change. In addition to inevitable transitions caused by these external factors, strategic business intention (e.g., vision, mission) and official goals (e.g., service, quality) have also driven organizational change (Smith, 1995).

All signs indicate that the rate of change is increasing (Criswell & Martin, 2007; Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). It appears that most contemporary organizations are undertaking some form of intentional change effort, requiring investment of time, energy, people, and money. Contemporary organizations are at the beginning of a new era of change, driven by technology (Malone, Morton, & Halperin, 1996; Patel, 2002), workforce diversity (Esen, 2005), and talent management (Fegley, 2006). The increase in corporate strategic planning provides impetus for numerous planned change initiatives that address both internal and external driving forces. The plethora of discrete planned change initiatives, in many instances, results in the need for a comprehensive systemic planned change in the corporate culture of many organizations (Gilmore, Shea, & Useem, 1997; Munck, 2001).

Unfortunately, the majority of planned change efforts fail (Bunker, 2008). A primary factor contributing to this failure is employees’ inability to adjust to the changed workplace. The plenitude of intentional or planned change in contemporary organizations does not come without problems or side effects. Workplace change causes a shift in individual and organizational dynamics. As a result, organizations, work groups, and individuals are going into a tailspin with cognitive and affective effects. Gilmore
et al. (1997) added emotional or psychological stress and diminished morale to the list of side effects, or unintended consequences of corporate change. Resistance to the planned change is a major issue that organizational leadership and change agents must address (Abrahamson, 2000; Barger & Kirby, 1995; A. Gilley, 2005). Employee resistance can come from misleading, outmoded, and unfounded assumptions organizations make about people and change (“Research Capsules,” 1995).

Another side effect of planned organizational change is negative or dysfunctional employee attitudes. Smith (1995) went so far as to suggest that the primary problem facing industry is the attitude of the worker. Because of workplace change, workers feel rejected and suffer loss of face. For example, the collective insecurity experienced by workers manifests itself as feeling trapped, frightened, or isolated. Sadness, anger, denial, and fear are also evident. Concurring with Smith, other authors (Bunker, 2008; Christensen, Marx, & Stevenson, 2006; Huy, 1999; Taylor, 2006; Zell, 2003) have identified employees’ attitudes toward organizational change as one of the most critical factors to the success of change efforts.

“Although aggressiveness is required to drive down . . . change, the aggression cannot be seen as old-style, authoritarian leadership” (Gilmore et al., 1997, p. 187). Every organization, to some extent, must rely on the voluntary cooperation of employees to implement successful and effective organizational change. Participation in decisions about the planned change instills ownership of the process and outcome of the change and, consequently, less resistance to the change (Coch & French, 1948).

Planned Organizational Change and Locus of Control

Of the articles consulted for this review of the locus of control construct, seven articles also addressed planned organizational change, organizational change, and/or planned change. All seven articles favored a disposition toward internality. Some viewed locus of control as fixed, whereas others viewed locus of control as fluid.

Based on the results of a study in which locus of control was an independent variable, McCarthy and Garavan (2006) suggested that “individuals with an internal locus of control will report more postfeedback behavioral change than individuals exhibiting an external locus of control” (p. 251). Although the authors recommended that HRD professionals design, deliver, and evaluate feedback programs to support employees’ performance improvement efforts, they provided limited insights for planning feedback training and development programs with respect to individuals’ locus of control. In a study on turnover intentions (TIs), Chiu, Lin, Tsai, and Hsiao (2005) showed that locus of control is an important moderating variable. The results indicated individuals with a locus of control toward internality had a stronger influence of job satisfaction on TI and organizational commitment (OC), whereas those with a locus of control toward externality had a stronger influence of perceived organizational support (POS) on job satisfaction and OC. The results suggested administering instruments measuring locus of control to differentiate internals from externals, then consulting
with the externals to boost their confidence, which in turn will increase their POS, job satisfaction, and OC and lower their TI. Specific training programs for externals can produce a more active response set, and HRD “practices that focus on individual perceptions of work and promote an employee-friendly environment in the organization may modify negative reactions” (p. 494).

Crooker, Smith, and Tabak (2002) used locus of control as a personality variable in their theoretical framework that explains the contextual antecedents of work–life balance. “Whereas individuals with intense value systems, low self-efficacy, external locus of control, and negative affect will tend to perceive less work-life balance, more positive outcomes are likely for individuals with personality hardiness and self-reliance” (p. 406). Similarly, Holton (2005) recommended including locus of control as an individual characteristic dispositional variable in the HRD Evaluation and Research Model, his “comprehensive framework for diagnosing and understanding the causal influences of HRD intervention outcomes” (p. 37). Holton’s locus of control assumptions paralleled those of Crooker et al., with more positive outcomes predicted for those individuals having an internal locus of control. In an integrative literature review, Burke and Hutchins (2007) identified locus of control as a factor influencing training transfer. The article however reported mixed results on internality versus externality and training transfer and cited the need for additional research to clarify or build findings.

The articles identified above tended to regard individuals’ locus of control as static rather than fluid or changeable. Based on the results of a study in which change in locus of control was an outcome, Kormanik (2008) described some White males’ shift toward externality as a coping strategy in response to changes in their work environment. The article offered HRD professionals some guidance for planned change initiatives in response to the shift in locus of control, to shift locus of control toward internality. Luthans, Vogelgesang, and Lester (2006) included locus of control in their conceptual framework of factors contributing to the psychological capital of resilience. To increase employees’ resiliency (i.e., internality), they proposed proactive (i.e., planned) HRD strategies, including increasing psychological assets, decreasing risk factors, and facilitating processes that allow individuals to enhance their resilience.

The complexity of change undeniably affects the workforce (Coates et al., 1989). Organizational change results in a disorienting dilemma for many employees. Employees’ sense of control is an issue in the reluctance of employees to embrace organizational change (Blake, 1992). One of the earlier studies of the locus of control construct showed that internality enhances information seeking, whereas externality reduces information seeking (Davis & Phares, 1967). Within the context of social learning theory (Rotter, 1954), information seeking would be viewed as a function of the value placed on the objectives to which the information-seeking behavior is related and the expectancy for success in achieving those objectives. Blake’s (1992) 11-step plan to simplify the change process and the change agent’s role includes fostering a sense of control over the process by involving employees in the change planning and implementation stages. A greater
sense of employee control comes from involvement and communication to build cohe-
siveness, collaboration, community norms of acceptance, involvement in problem
solving and decision making, and participatory intervention. “Workers who are active
participants in the firm will be able to assist management in dealing with the emotional
vulnerability that accompanies organizational change. Change must hold a positive
value to all employees. Employees must become initiators of change. Companies must
maintain and enhance employee self-esteem” (Smith, 1995, p. 79). This cannot occur
when employees have low internality.

The ability to guide change includes coming to terms with what Fairbain (1952)
has called the internal saboteur, an inner voice that subtly undermines changes that an
individual has committed himself or herself to making. Anxiety fuels this inner voice.
Conversely, a study by Miller, Johnson, and Grau (1994) shows that employees’ anxi-
ey about organizational change did not influence their attitude about change. They
suggest that a moderate level of anxiety about change may actually have positive con-
sequences in employee attitudes.

Conclusions

This article provided a review of the literature on the locus of control construct, high-
lighting the application of the construct to the workplace context of planned
organizational change by HRD professionals. The review showed that locus of control
is a widely researched construct associated with many research and academic disci-
plines. The initial research on locus of control appears to be in the field of psychology,
primarily clinical psychology for individual counseling. Although still being heavily
researched in the psychology field, later application moved to adult development, then
education. Direct application to employees in the workplace context appears to have
begun in the 1980s. This workplace application was based on general expectancies in
the macro sense, for purposes other than individual counseling.

Implications for HRD Theory and Research

This review has implications for future theory development and research in HRD. One
implication is to incorporate locus of control elements into theoretical models for
planned change initiatives. Lefcourt (1976) suggested that “the exercise of control and
the ability to predict the occurrence of aversive stimuli have an ameliorating effect
upon the recipient” (p. 7). By investigating employees’ perceptions of locus of control
under various conditions of specific planned organizational change, this review may
provide HRD with insights into factors affecting employees’ interpretation of mes-
ges about organizational change and employees’ openness or resistance to change.
This review should contribute to development of new models for facilitating change—
models that take into consideration locus of control. Models for facilitating change
should enhance, or at least maintain, employees’ sense of belief (C. N. Jackson, 1985).
Individual employees must have some sense that the change will work, reflected in a
significant positive expectancy to his or her effort and a significant positive instrumentality to his or her performance. Expectancy requires that the individual value the outcome, have self-efficacy, understand and trust the reward system, and avoid negative or unacceptable outcomes (Lawler, 1973). The constructs of expectancy and instrumentality link directly back to Rotter’s (1954) seminal work on social learning theory and internal versus external control of reinforcement. Locus of control is based on expectancy for reinforcement that tends toward internality or externality.

Another research implication of this review centers on inclusion of locus of control as a variable in studies of planned change. Gaining information on the relationship between organizational change and locus of control may spur additional research on locus of control as an antecedent to willingness to participate in planned organizational change. Antecedents to acceptance of organizational change are generally understudied. Miller et al. (1994) suggest that an orientation toward internal locus of control increases the likelihood of an individual’s willingness to participate in organizational change. It is ironic that Miller et al. did not consider the need for autonomy or dominance in their study of the antecedents to willingness to participate in change. These are fundamental human needs underlying social learning theory and the locus of control construct (Rotter, 1954). Change models should also adhere to Rotter’s (1966) clarification that locus of control is fluid, rather than fixed. Although studies have focused on the relationship between locus of control and organizational change, more empirical evidence is needed comparing the relationship under different planned changes and examining the potential shift in locus of control associated with planned change.

**Implications for HRD Practice**

Although Chermack, Lynham, and Ruona (2003) identified locus of control as one of six critical uncertainties facing HRD, they offered HRD professionals no guidance relative to the locus of control in planning organizational change initiatives. Perhaps this review will begin to address the need for guidance. In practical application, identification of intentional organizational change efforts that are more likely to identify loss of internal control of reinforcement would provide the data to increase the organizational ability to promote employees’ internal locus of control. Locus of control is seen as a psychological construct, and some research shows that perceptions of locus of control can change as a result of critical events (Cain, 1994). Subsequently, the organization can introduce mechanisms or processes into the change planning and implementation processes in the hope that the mechanisms or processes would help maintain positive employee attitudes and increase, or at least maintain, internality of employees.

One of the many reasons planned change efforts fail is the lack of employee involvement. Employees feel “done to.” This in turn has a definite correlation to the employees’ shift in locus of control toward externality. Those leading organizational change would be foolish to not consider the factors that create resistance to change and
plan strategies for overcoming these barriers (Miller et al., 1994). Keeping employees informed in general and especially regarding the rationale and objectives for planned change would likely help minimize the disorientation experienced by employees during the planned change process. The locus of control focus is on maintaining employees’ sense of internality around the change and its outcome. Blake’s (1992) 11-step plan to simplify the change process and the change agent’s role included fostering a sense of control over the process by involving employees in the change planning and implementation stages. A greater sense of control among employees comes from involvement and communication to build cohesiveness, collaboration, involvement in problem solving and decision making, participatory intervention, and community norms of acceptance.

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Dr. Martin B. Kormanik is President & CEO of O.D. Systems, an Alexandria, VA, USA firm providing organizational assessment, consulting, training, facilitation, and coaching services to corporate, nonprofit, and government clients. His research focuses on individual and organizational change and development.

Dr. Tonette S. Rocco is an associate professor of adult education and human resource development at Florida International University, USA. She serves as a coeditor for New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development. Her research interests include equity issues, continuing professional development, and career development.