

THE LOCUS OF CONTROL ATTRIBUTE AND THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS¹

L. WAYNE PLUMLY AND JOHN E. OLIVER

Valdosta State College

Summary.—Numerous psychological differences among ethnic groups have been reported. These differences affect the economic performance of the groups and influence the efficiency of policy actions taken to alter the economic behavior. Only through the effective integration of both psychological knowledge and economic policy can the job search process be optimized for the externally oriented hard-core unemployed.

When an individual is placed in a situation of helplessness over a prolonged period of time, this individual may develop an "external locus of control", i.e., a belief that the rewards of life are controlled by forces outside oneself and tend to occur independently of one's own efforts (Rotter, 1966). The presence of this attribute diminishes the effectiveness of actions taken to help this individual. For example, when an individual is continually faced with prolonged periods of unemployment and increased effort to affect the outcomes of the employment search is fruitless, learned helplessness is very likely to occur. The individual may cease searching for employment and efforts to assist the individual in job search and job training may be futile. "It is widely believed that economic success depends on having not only the necessary skills and ability (human capital) but also the right attitudes toward work" (Andrisani, 1983, p. 441). A much more intensive psychological counseling program is needed to instill certain attitudes that would tend to increase the probability of economic success for an externally oriented individual.

Research indicates that the black population is more externally oriented than the white population (Battle & Rotter, 1963; Lefcourt & Ladwig, 1965, 1966). In addition, Scott and Phelan (1969) found that unemployed blacks were significantly more externally oriented than unemployed whites. In an attempt to understand the underlying causes of these racial differences, Gurin, Gurin, Lao, and Beattie (1969), using a factor analysis technique, investigated the responses of 1,695 black students on a locus of control questionnaire. The "factors" pointed directly to the existence of a situation of long-term helplessness for many black persons. These black students reported their belief that most individual members of society possess little control, that they personally possess little control, that racial discrimination could be modified only slightly,

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that black persons as a group possess little control, and that the system was to blame for their plight. The studies suggest that such a group may perceive positive and/or negative events as unrelated to their own behavior and so beyond personal control. The lack of association between individual effort and reward may also be used as an explanation for the failure of government programs to have a significant effect on black hard-core unemployment.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest that job search behavior has two dimensions—for the individual and for the economy. There are four possible conditions that the job search may assume when the two types of individuals (internally and externally oriented) are found in economic situations of low and high unemployment. Four possible states in motivating job search are illustrated below.

Individual Orientation	Four Possible States in Motivating Job Search	
Internal	Self-management skills should be provided.	A problem does not exist.
	4	1
	3	2
	An intense system of counseling, support, encouragement, and incentives is necessary.	Counseling is required to place the external in a job.
External	High Unemployment	High Employment
	Economy	

If internally oriented individuals are in a situation of low unemployment, there is no problem. The internal person believes his own efforts will lead him to employment, and it is only a matter of time before his search brings him into contact with a suitable job. If the internal person must seek a job in the difficult situation of high unemployment, then in spite of the fact that very few jobs are available, the internal person is self-motivated to seek employment. A system which provides the information and skills needed to allow that person to proceed is the only need on the psychological side of the problem. Of course, a more pressing need is the creation of jobs.

If external individuals are in a low unemployment economy, jobs may be available but the external person is not a self-starter. While the individual's personal needs may motivate him to visit an employment or welfare agency where both jobs and benefits are available, his commitment to the job search is weak. He perceives limited material opportunity and little relation between individual effort and reward. A job counselor must not only take the initiative to find a suitable job for this individual but must also develop in the individual a sense of personal control.

An external person in a high unemployment economy represents the worst possible combination of variables. The learned helplessness of the external person presents a formidable challenge that can only be overcome by an intense system of counseling, support, encouragement, and incentives.

Prior empirical findings support the hypotheses that black men as a group are externally oriented and that black men as a group are more externally oriented than white men. This does not imply that external orientation is solely a problem for black individuals but is rather a more severe one. In addition, it is a problem which may not be overcome with traditional job creation and search programs.

Different approaches have been used to combat learned helplessness. Eisenberger, Park, and Frank (1976) and Brickman, Linsenmeier, and McCaveins (1976) taught learned industriousness and learned competence. Both groups were able to increase success of their subjects using basic behavior-modification techniques, e.g., rewarding industriousness and competence.

There is some evidence that job counselors may be able to increase job search efforts in a number of ways. Helping applicants to understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and qualifications as well as the requirements of various jobs apparently leads to increased and more efficient effort by reducing indecision and anxiety while focusing attention on jobs more likely to be offered (Fry, 1975; Krivatsy & Magoon, 1976; McGowan, 1977; Mandoner & Siess, 1976).

Some form of self-analysis combined with identification of jobs which "fit" the person seems to be inherent in all these approaches. Bowser, Sherman, and Whisler (1974) used self-analysis, identification of industries where abilities might apply, the development of a realistic job objective, resumé preparation, role-playing telephone interviews, use of a mailing list, and following through on applications to increase the effectiveness of job search. Eighty-three percent of those who completed the program secured employment while the typical rate had been and continued to be seven percent.

At the macroeconomics or system level, the efforts of counselors, trainers, and others may be greatly enhanced by programs designed to create jobs where none exist. Only through the effective integration of both psychological knowledge and economic policy can the job search process be optimized for externally oriented persons. A significant gain in employment of black individuals may be achieved by integrating intense psychological counseling with job training, assistance in job search, and job creation.

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