LOCUS OF CONTROL AND EMBARRASSABILITY

Locus of Control and Embarrassability

Among College Students

Amanda Hart

Under Supervision of Leanne Olson

Wisconsin Lutheran College

Second Annual
Undergraduate Research Symposium
CHARIS Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran College
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53226

April 27 and 28, 2002
Everyone becomes embarrassed at some point in time. However, it seems to happen more easily for some individuals than for others. Many factors could account for these individual differences in embarrassability. One of these factors may be personality, or more specifically, the psychological construct of locus of control.

The question this study addresses is if individuals possessing an internal locus of control have a higher embarrassability than those with an external locus. Robinson (1991) defines embarrassment as a form of social anxiety that occurs when a person’s public identity in a particular situation is threatened. Thus, embarrassability refers to an individual’s general susceptibility to feeling awkward or uncomfortable. Lefton (1994) defines locus of control as how people view the world and how they identify the causes of success or failure in their lives. It involves how an individual views reinforcement and if an outcome is seen as dependant on one’s own self or on luck, chance, fate, or is merely unpredictable.

Interest in the relationship between locus of control and a person’s susceptibility to embarrassment began with Rotter’s (1966) research concerning generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. He hypothesized that measurement of internal and external locus of control was possible and that differences in behavior will occur based on an individual’s understanding of the causes of reinforcements (Hock, 2001). Rotter then created the widely accepted I-E scale and conducted many studies that found significant correlations between I-E scores and people’s behavior in specific circumstances (Hock, 2001). The results of many of these studies showed a positive relationship between an internal locus of control and effectiveness in life. However, in his later writings, Rotter addressed the idea that deeming control over events in one’s life may not lead to a superior lifestyle. When an individual attempts to change a situation that is not changeable (such as one that causes embarrassment), frustration,
Embarrassability                3

disappointment, and depression are potential outcomes. “When forces outside of the individual are actually in control of behavioral consequences, the most realistic and healthy approach to take is probably one of an external orientation” (Hock, 2001, p.195).

Although the relationship between locus of control and many variables has been explored, little research exists correlating locus of control and embarrassability. However, in regard to Rotter’s note of concern, it is an important question. Robert Edelmann (1990) approached the topic by studying self-reports of chronic blushers and self-reports regarding coping behaviors for embarrassment across culture. This descriptive study highlighted the importance of internal and external cues in embarrassability. The results indicated a possibility exists that in certain situations, attending to internal cues may generate embarrassment (Edelmann, 1990). This study supports the notion that locus of control may be related to embarrassability.

An unassigned developmental analysis regarding the subject examined elementary school-aged children’s concept of embarrassment. Forty-one adults and 190 five, seven, nine, and 11 year olds volunteers reported situations that made them feel embarrassed (Seidner, Stipek, & Feshbach, 1998). Results supported the hypothesis that most 5-year-olds understood feelings of embarrassment occur primarily from outcomes controlled by and dependent upon one’s own behavior or characteristics. (Seidner et al., 1998).

In light of this information and the previous studies, it is reasonable to hypothesize that participants with an internal locus of control will feel they control the events that occur in their lives. It is possible, then, that the responsibility of controlling what happens will turn to guilt when an undesirable situation arises. A person will feel embarrassed if he or she feels he or she has caused the event. Participants with an external locus of control, however, will tend to see
life largely as a game of chance. They see the events that occur in their lives as controlled by external factors (gods, fate, destiny, or other powers). A person possessing an external locus of control will not feel responsible for an undesirable event, and it is therefore unlikely he or she will have a high embarrassability level. Specifically, the researcher hypothesized that students who possess an internal locus of control will have a higher embarrassability as compared to students with an external locus of control. In this quasi-experimental study of the relationship between locus of control and embarrassability, several theoretical implications can be acknowledged in an attempt to further the growth of science. This study could potentially give researchers insight into methods of training humans to be less susceptible to embarrassment. It may also yield results pertaining to how a person’s Christian faith plays a role in Locus of Control and embarrassment levels.

Method

Participants

The researcher convenience sampled 29 undergraduate college students (23 female and 16 male), ages from 18-28, with a mean age of 19.86, from a small, Christian, Liberal Arts College in the Midwestern United States. The researcher selected the participants based on membership in one of two undergraduate psychology courses. Convenience sampling yielded a non-representative sample of the population and allowed for little generalizability of the results.

Instruments

The researcher created a demographics survey regarding age, gender, major, hours spent on homework on an average night, and job possession (see Appendix A). The questions concerning age and major were open-ended, while the rest required an answer by forced choice selection.
To operationally define Locus of control, the researcher utilized Nowiki-Strickland’s Internal-External Control Scale (1966). This survey was comprised of 40 yes or no questions concerning feelings about who and what the participants viewed as the controls in their lives. The questions tested the degree of trust in such issues as luck, fate, and self-reliance. An example of one these questions is: “Do you believe that when bad things happen, they are just going to happen no matter what you do to try to stop them?” A large number of studies exist reporting reliability data for this survey, and internal consistency measures are above the .60 level (Robinson, 1991). The researcher did not take further action to measure reliability, content validity, or criterion validity of this survey. To quantify the variable and score the locus of control survey, the researcher used the choice selection method required by the Norwiki-Strickland test. Participants were divided into 3 groups. According to the survey, participants who scored 8 or less have an internal locus of control. Participants in the middle category (9-16) have partial control of their lives; and those who scored 17 or above have an external locus of control.

To operationally define embarrassability, the researcher used a modified version of Mondigliani’s (1966) embarrassability scale, acquired from Robinson (1991). This consisted of 25 Likert-scale questions requiring participants to examine different situations and then rate how embarrassed they would feel (1 being the least embarrassed, 5 being the most). An example of the presented situations is to suppose you were unable to stop coughing during a lecture. Robinson reports that scores on the embarrassability scale correlate moderately (r = .33) with embarrassment in a real social situation. This offers reason to believe that the test is valid. The researcher did not take further action to measure reliability, content validity, or criterion validity of this survey. The researcher gave the participants an embarrassability score by adding up all the
responses circled to each question on Mondigliani’s scale. Participants who scored closer to 25, the minimum possible, are less susceptible to embarrassment; whereas those who scored closer to 125, the maximum possible, are more inclined to embarrassability.

The researcher utilized these instruments as a way to measure how easily a person is embarrassed and their psychological construct of locus of control. However, these surveys were not administered as two separate surveys. In an attempt to avoid response bias caused by social desirability and mental selection, the researcher combined the questions of each survey into one.

Procedures

The researcher conducted the study by personally distributing informed consents (see Appendix B) and surveys to two undergraduate psychology classrooms at a small, Christian, Liberal Arts College in the Midwestern United States. To insure confidentiality and anonymity, the informed consent outlined the rights of the participants, as well as explained the purpose, risks, benefits, and procedures of the study. The researcher explained to the participants that instructions for completion were included on the front page with the demographics survey (see Appendix A). The participants were unaware of the researcher’s hypothesis.

Results

The researcher predicted that students who possessed an internal locus of control would have a higher embarrassability level than students with an external locus of control. The researcher used descriptive statistics to analyze the data the study yielded. Results indicated a $M = 9.10$ locus of control score, with a $SD$ of 5.18; and a $M = 63.34$ embarrassability score, with a $SD$ of 15.7. Scores on the Locus of Control survey ranged from 1-21 and scores on the embarassability survey ranged from 37-94. The data showed a correlational value between Locus of Control and embarrassability of $r = 2.15$, with a $p$ value of .26. Results also indicated that 52%
of the participants had an internal locus of control and 10% had an external locus of control. When contrasted, the data for the internals showed a $M = 64.73$ embarrassability score, with a $SD$ of 23.26; whereas the externals showed a $M = 73.00$ embarrassability score, and a $SD$ of 13.96.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between locus of control and embarrassability. The results of the study did not support the hypothesis that individuals with an internal locus of control would be more easily embarrassed than those with an external locus of control. Participants with an internal locus of control had a $M = 64.73$ embarrassability score, whereas those with an external locus of control had a $M = 73.00$ embarrassability score. However, the results of this study only yielded 3 participants who qualified as possessing an external locus of control.

The fact that the study did not confirm the hypothesis contradicts Elderman’s (1990) study in that internal cues did not generate embarrassment. The study also did not support the results of the developmental analysis conducted by Seidner, Stipek, and Feshback (1998). In addition, it is highly inconsistent with Rotter’s view concerning internal misrepresentations of control (Hock, 2001, p.195). These ambiguities suggest that many extraneous variables and limitations of the study may have affected the outcome.

Probably the most substantial limitation is that the highest attained score on the locus of control survey was 21, out of a possible 40. In this study, there were too few participants with an external locus of control to accurately test the hypothesis. This does however; demonstrate the potential for further research.

Several reasons could explain why so few participants reported having an external locus of control. The fact that the study was conducted at a Christian college may account for why
participants did not choose responses that illustrate a trust in fate, luck, or other powers. It is possible that the study would yield different results, were words on the I-E scale changed from fate and luck to God and Jesus. Considering the population, the dominance of internal locus of control may be due to the belief that luck and fate are superstitious or against one’s faith. A study by Welton, Adkins, Ingle, & Dixon (1996) addressed this issue. The researchers used various locus of control subscales and assessed subjects on their degree of internal locus of control with regard to perceived control by powerful others, belief in chance, and belief in God control (Hock, 2001). The results of the study produced a positive correlation between the advantages associated with an internal locus of control and an individual’s perceived control by God. The researchers concluded that “if a person has an external locus of control as measured by Rotter’s scale, but the external power is perceived as a strong faith in a supreme being, they will be less subject to the typical problems associated with externals” (Hock, 2001, p.194).

An additional reason for the low number of participants with an external locus of control is a potential difference between a healthy and unhealthy internal locus of control. The possibility exists that there are different levels of internal loci of control. Positive connotations are normally associated with internal locus of control but may not always be accurate. For example, an individual who thinks they control every situation is likely to make attribution errors and feel an event was caused by them, when it actually was not. However, perhaps this tendency only appears in certain, unhealthy types of internal loci of control. There needs to be a definition for individuals who attribute experiences appropriately to the causer.

Response bias caused by social desirability may also have contributed to the lack of participants with an external locus of control. It is possible that individuals do not want to act
embarrassed because it is embarrassing to be embarrassed. They may report that they would not experience awkwardness in a situation, when inside, they really would feel uncomfortable.

Additional extraneous variables and limitations exist in this study. The researcher used a quasi-experimental design which lacked control. Because of this, causation cannot be inferred between the variables. Convenience sampling did not represent the college population and therefore yielded no generalizability to any population. The instruments in this study were not tested for reliability, construct validity or criterion validity by the researcher and may not have actually measured the variables. The researcher also noted that the presented situations in the surveys seemed somewhat unclear and could be interpreted different ways. Furthermore, the number of participants tested was very small and participants may not have been motivated.

However, this study is important because it supports previous research and presents several possible routes by which to increase the field of knowledge on this topic. To replicate this study in the future, it would be beneficial for the researcher to randomly sample the participants from a larger, more representative population. Conducting appropriate assessment and measurement will insure valid and reliable instruments that have no questionable matters within their content. In addition, compensation offered to participants by the researcher may increase motivation.

Future studies of locus of control and embarrassment could implement a true independent variable, random assignment and sampling, and different treatment groups, including a control. One aspect to investigate is the possibility of testing differences between individuals with healthy and unhealthy internal loci of control. Many of the participants in this study showed a healthy ability to evaluate situations and be responsive. This was revealed by their ability to remain unembarrassed in an awkward situation. However, those individuals having more of a
tendency to misrepresent reality through attribution errors may have an inclination to become more embarrassed. Another step that could further this study would be to determine how the relationship between faith and locus of control might affect embarrassability. Researchers could conduct an experiment by utilizing a locus of control survey similar the one used by Welton, Adkins, Ingle, & Dixon (1996).

Much useful knowledge could be gained from further investigation into the area of embarrassment and locus of control. It could possibly be used and applied in therapy involving individuals who suffer from extreme embarrassability. Ways to reduce the negative effects of embarrassment could be discovered and the field of study could be opened up to a wide variety of explorations.
References


Appendix A

Instructions: In the survey below, you will read a series of questions. Many of them are related to how you would feel or act in certain situations. For several questions, you will be asked to rank your feelings on a scale from 1 to 5. Other questions require you to circle a simple yes or no answer. Please answer each question in complete honesty. There are no right or wrong answers. As stated in the consent you signed, your answers will remain anonymous. If you encounter any problems or questions while taking this survey, feel free to consult the researcher. She will clear up whatever she can to the best of her ability without jeopardizing the results of the survey. Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Please remember it is important to answer each question as truthfully and openly as possible!

Questions:

1. Please Circle your gender. M F

2. How old are you?

3. Please circle what year you are in school. Fre Soph Jr Sr

4. What is your declared major? If you are undeclared, please write undeclared.

5. Please circle approximately how many hours you spend studying for classes on an average night. 0-1 1-2 2-3 3-4 4-5 5+

6. Do you currently hold a job where you work at least five hours a week? (Either off campus or on campus) yes no

This test consists of two types of questions. If a yes or no option is given, please indicate your answer by circling either yes or no. Otherwise please describe your reaction to the situation by using the scale below. Circle the number that best describes how embarrassed you would be.

1 = I would not feel the least embarrassed: not awkward or uncomfortable at all.
2 = I would feel slightly embarrassed.
3 = I would feel fairly embarrassed: somewhat self- conscience and rather awkward and uncomfortable.
4 = I would feel quite embarrassed.
5 = I would feel strongly embarrassed: extremely self- conscience, awkward, and uncomfortable.

Try to imagine as vividly as possible that each of these events is happening to you.
Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT

Researcher: Amanda Hart
School: Wisconsin Lutheran College
Class: Psychological Research Methods
Phone: 414-773-5567

The intent of this form is to explain the purpose and procedures of this study. It is also a consent agreement between the researcher and you. It protects your rights as a person participating in research at Wisconsin Lutheran College. The purpose of this study is to determine whether embarrassment levels are related to personality. Your willingness to participate in this research study is greatly appreciated.

During a portion of your regularly scheduled psychology class, you will be handed a survey of 66 questions. The questions will be about different feelings and hypothetical situations. Although the survey is relatively easy to complete, please answer as truthfully as you can. There are no correct answers. Your complete honesty is extremely important. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Do not feel rushed, as the researcher wants you to think about your answers. All of your answers will remain anonymous. Names will not be asked and in no way will your answers will be linked to you. In addition, the researcher will only be analyzing group results, and will not have access to individual scores.

There are no risks involved in this study. If you do feel a sense of discomfort, feel free to raise your hand and ask the researcher a question. She will answer to the best of her ability. You also have the option to return your survey and withdraw from the study. You are a volunteer and have the right to do this at any time without penalty.

You may receive extra credit points for participating in this research project.

When you have completed the survey, please return it to the researcher at the front of the room. If further information is desired concerning follow-up information or results of this study, please do not hesitate to contact Amanda Hart at the number provided above. You may also email her at hart_Amanda@wlc.edu.

Please sign below if you are willing to participate in this research study.

Name (please print) _______________________________________________________________
Signature ________________________________________________________________
Date _____/__________/_______

Thank you again for giving up your time and energy to contribute to this study.