NORM OF INTERNALITY AND EVALUATION OF PROFESSIONAL WORTH IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Astrid MIGNON
Patrick MOLLARET
Bruno ROUSSEAUX

Université de Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Reims

Running head: Norm of internality and professional worth

Correspondence:
ASTRID MIGNON
65 RUE DU JARD
51100 REIMS
TEL: 06.19.89.40.27
Email: astrid.mignon@univ-reims.fr
In this research, we studied the influence of the norm of
internality on a professional evaluation task. 44 executives were
asked to evaluate applicants for a job promotion. They were provided
with two kinds of information regarding the candidate: a/ an
evaluation of the target’s previous job performance (excellent /
medium) by a supervisor; and b/ the target’s answers (internal /
external) to an internality questionnaire. The dependant variables
measured (1) the professional worth of the applicant and (2) access
to judgement criteria by the executives. Results showed that
excellent candidates were preferred to medium, and more importantly,
that internal candidates were preferred to external ones. Both
factors (job performance and internality) are equally important in
the proportion of variance they explained. Nevertheless, executives
estimated that job performance was the main criterion they used to
judge the applicant. This difference between objective and
subjective weight of the two factors (as well as correlation
analysis) shows that subjects did not systematically have access to
judgement criteria.
INTRODUCTION

This contribution examines the influence of the norm of internality on a personnel selection task. We will first present the theoretical background providing experimental evidence of the normativity of internal explanations of both behaviors and outcomes (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988; Jellison & Green, 1981), with a particular emphasis on highly socially anchored tasks.

Since early research on attribution, the propensity of the social perceiver to provide internal explanations of social events has been widely documented (e.g. Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, Amabile & Steinmetz, 1977). The frameworks proposed by Kelley (1967) and by Jones and Davis (1965), although different (the former attempts to provide global understanding of attribution principles whereas the latter is limited to dispositional attribution), are both idealized models, aimed to conceptualise what attributions should ideally be with respect to a scientific norm\(^1\). In this theoretical context, the dominance of internal explanations has been interpreted within the criteria of scientific rationality and conceived as an error (Ross, 1977). Researchers in the 1990’s then had to make an attempt to study the cognitive implementation of attribution models. For

\(^1\) Note that according to Hamilton (1980), the Jones and Davis model describes « an intuitive lawyer », rather than an “intuitive scientist”. The rule for providing an internal explanation in this model ( “could have been otherwise”) is based on an attribution of responsibility, not of causality. If Paul is aggressive with Ted, Paul is responsible as far as he behaves intentionally. Even though social context or Ted’s provocation could be plausible explanations, they are not absolutely relevant, because internal attribution on Paul is conceived to be a judgment, not an explanation.
example, the energetic model proposed by Gilbert, Pelham and Krull (1988) is in the Jones and Davis vein, but refers also to some limitations of the cognitive system. The internal explanation phase is closer to the first stage of judgement (the identification stage) and is consequently the most spontaneous. On the contrary, an external attribution is an effortful examination of the contextual factors and is not systematically provided, especially if the perceiver is cognitively busy. Authors in this area (see also Trope, 1986; Reeder, 1993) proposed the “cognitive miser” metaphor to assess the actual complexity of attribution process.

An another theoretical background is rooted in the explanation of outcomes (Rotter, 1966). In this area, Locus of Control (LOC) is either internal (if subjects explained their outcomes by their own behaviors) or external (if subjects explained their outcomes by chance or any situational factor). Unlike attribution research, internal explanations of outcomes do not refer to a bias regarding a scientific norm, but rather to an adaptive function. It would be adaptively important, in any social learning task, to make a link between our own behaviours and outcomes. Thus, an internal Locus of Control is a necessary condition of performance. The intra-individual aspects of LOC function have been investigated by many authors concerned with therapeutic applications (e.g. Seligman, 1975). For their part, Jellison and Green (1981) have shown that
people put forward internal explanations with a view to gaining others’ approval. Thus, their approach claims that the social desirability of internal responses in a LOC questionnaire is an important aspect of control psychology. This latter aspect has been developed and systematized by Beauvois and Dubois (1988) in a global conception of the normativity of any explanation (either explanations of behaviours or explanations of outcomes). Such a contribution is inherent to a “change of standard” perspective moving the intra-individual explanations (cognitive limitations or motivation) to a more social understanding of the naïve psychology. The basic assumption is that internal explanations are socially desirable and useful in many social contexts (regardless of their scientific value). In our view, the major topic of the norm of internality research is an attempt to articulate some aspects of the social functioning with every day psychology (see Beauvois, 1984). This framework is heuristic, merely because of its materialist starting place. Moreover, it gives rise to some stimulating socio-cognitive issues linking evaluative practice to internality (see Dubois, 1994). Internality would be a constitutive element of the social evaluation process because “it corresponds to an optimal exercise of evaluation practices in organizations” (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988). Thus, internality and evaluation are certainly linked, because it would be difficult to provide an evaluation of a social agent if performances were considered as situationally
determined. That is probably the reason why the search for dispositional consistency is recurrent in organizational research (for critical view of this tenet: Davis-Blake & Pfeiffer, 1989). The impact of the norm of internality on professional and scholastic evaluation has been widely documented (e.g. Desrumaux-Zagrodnicki & Rainis, 2000; Dubois & Le Poulter, 1991).

An experimental paradigm used to study the norm of internality in a social decision task is called the paradigm of judges, in which participants have to give an opinion of targets with regard to their supposed answers to an internality questionnaire. In fact, the experimenter provided the targets’ responses to establish clear external or internal profiles. In an insightful experiment, Pansu (1994) asked executives to decide whether a subordinate was capable of promotion to a higher job or not. Participants were provided two types of information (presented in two separate files): the target response to an internality questionnaire (either internal or external), and the formal evaluation of the target (either excellent or medium). This latter information was related to the qualification (professional information) of the target. Subjects were separated into two groups: half of them had to judge the internal and medium target, and the other ones had to judge the external and excellent. Results showed that the internal/medium targets were considered as good as external/excellent ones. The internality criterion still
applies even though more explicitly formal and relevant information about the judgement objective was available.

This result, although intriguing, is not sufficient to draw adequate conclusions about the role of internality on professional worth, mainly because the experiment is not built on a factorial design. Assessing the effect-size of both sources of variance is thus impossible. The fact that managers rely as much on the internality of the candidate as on his previous performance depends on the particular operationalization of both types of information. We think that the only way to measure the real influence of normative information on an evaluation task is to assess both its objective and subjective weight in comparison with objective and subjective weight of the professional information. To be meaningful, the internality effect-size has to be similar to the performance effect-size, and moreover, its subjective weight has to be equal or inferior. It would be problematic in our view if the subjective weight of the professional information were underrated, because previous performance of an applicant is an official criterion for job selection. If executives estimate that they did not rely on this information after a judgement phase, it would be interpreted as the consequence of a fatal problem with our operationalization. The relation between objective and subjective weight is connected to the access to judgement criteria (e.g. Beauvois & Cambon, 1997; Nisbett
& Bellows, 1977). We lack experimental data providing clear conclusions about the perspicacity of the judge with normative influence in a job selection task. If the normative information impact is as effective as the professional information, the comparison between its objective and subjective weight would be informative. Our experiment is thus exploratory because we lack experimental data providing estimations of the proportion of variance explained by experimental factors.

In conclusion, we had two main objectives. First, a replication of Pansu's findings using a factorial design. We expected two main effects of each type of information on the professional worth of the target, that is to say that excellent candidates should be preferred to medium ones, and internal candidates should be preferred to external ones. Thus, the first dependant variable (a professional judgement scale) aimed to measure the effective impact of both types of information. The second main objective was to measure the subjective weight of both types of information and to learn more about the participants' awareness of judgement criteria.

METHOD

Overview

For practical reasons, we obtained the participation of only 44 executives and we chose a mixed design. The procedure is divided in
two sessions with at least one-week delay between them. The formal aspect of the booklet (the applicant previous job performance) remained constant but the normative information varied. To make sure that this procedure did not influence the respondents (by implicit or explicit comparison strategies), we:

a) measured this sequence effect on all the dependent variables and
b) performed a separate analysis to ensure that there were no differences between results collected in the two different sessions (either the first or the second judgment)

Participants
44 executives from three different firms in Champagne Ardenne (France) were contacted and questioned at their workplace.

Material
We constructed four kind of application in which three types of information were displayed: the candidate’s answers to an internality questionnaire and an index card concerning his performance. Both types of information were preceded by the target’s biography added to make sure that participants believed they were dealing with a real person.

The internality questionnaire
We used the QILAST constructed by Pansu (1994). Items dealt with desirable and undesirable events related to the work domain. Each event was followed by an internal explanation and by an external one (order was controlled). The type of event (behaviour and outcome) was controlled. The original form of the QILAST contains 32 items. We used only half of the questionnaire to control a priori the amount of information. The 16 items selected were controlled for the type of event and for the desirability level. Here is an example of an item:

Daniel will not have his saw out contract

It is because:

- the firm does not need his service any more. *(External)*
- Daniel did not know how to enhance himself enough. *(Internal)*

The questionnaire was said to have been completed by the candidate. Executives were told that the applicant had to select one of the two explanations. The fictive applicant selected 12 external explanations in the external condition and 12 internal explanations in the internal condition.

*The professional information*

This index card was a replication of a real evaluation and similar to the one use by Pansu (1994). It was supposed to be completed by the superior of the applicant. The content was about two categories:
candidate’s performances in term of objectives and skill at management. At the end of this index card, two general evaluations were completed corresponding to a summary of the proceeding information: one concerns the candidate’s professional attitudes (innovation, organisation, management and communication) and the other concerns his performances (a selection was made between “very satisfying”, “satisfying” or “not satisfying”). For each category, an evaluation was provided by choosing the “negative”, “average” or “positive” case. To present the candidate as “excellent”, most of the evaluations were “positive” and the general evaluation of his performances were “very satisfying” and to present the candidate as “medium”, most of the evaluations were “average” the general evaluation of his performances were “satisfying”.

Procedure

Participants had to judge a target who was applying for a new vacancy as a foreman. As in Pansu's experiment, the applicant was presented as excellent or medium (between subject factor), and as internal or external (within subjects factor). Each executive had thus to estimate the professional worth of two candidates, which differed in their responses to the internality questionnaire. There was a one-week delay between the two sessions. The order of presentation of the internal and external information files was balanced. The executives had to fill in a 10 point-scale (0 to 9) to
express their judgement about the applicant's professional worth. On two additional 6-point scales, participants had to estimate how important (6: very important) they perceived both types of information in arriving at their judgement.

RESULTS

Effect of order of presentation

To ensure that the sequence of presentation did not influence participants’ attribution scores, we conducted 2 (performance) x 2 (normativity) x 2 (session) ANOVA with normativity and session as repeated measures variables on each of the dependent variables. On professional judgment scores and on the importance of normative information scores, there were neither significant main effects of the order of presentation nor interactions. On the importance of professional information scores, a main effect of the order was significant at $p<.03$ ($F(1,40) = 5.649$): estimation of the importance of professional information was higher when the external candidate was presented at first ($M = 4.34$) rather than when it was the internal one ($M = 3.96$). Interaction effects were not significant on the importance of the professional information. The analyse were relevant to assess that the impact of the internality is not a consequence of an implicit comparison between the two applicants. Nevertheless, we examined results both for all participants and in each session to increase the statistical validity.
**Judgement about the applicant**

Results of the 2 (performance) x 2 (normativity) ANOVA with “normativity” as a repeated measures variable indicated two significant main effects. Internal applicants were preferred to external ones, $F(1,42) = 22.98, p < .0001$; excellent applicants were preferred to medium ones, $F(1,42) = 24.95, p < .0001$ (see table 1). No significant interaction effect was obtained, $F(1,42) = 2.242, N.S.$ These results are consistent with the above analysis about the impact of the norm of internality on a social judgement task. Then, we performed a 2 (performance) x 2 (normativity) ANOVA on social judgment provided in the first session, the normativity factor treated as an independent factor. The same ANOVA was performed on social judgment provided in the second session. Means, $F$ and proportion of variance (Eta Squared) are reported in Table 1. Patterns of results are similar to the one obtained for all participants (see Table 1). Importantly, the two factors are quite similar regarding the proportion of variance they explained (the Eta Squared respectively equal to 23.3% and 25.2% in session 1 and 18% and 23.3% in session 2).

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**
Subjective weight of the two types of information

Executives had to provide two estimations of the subjective weight of both types of information. We then added up the two estimations to obtain a global score (from 0 to 12). Results indicated a significant simple effect: professional information ($M = 8.34, sd = 1.12$) was considered by participants as more important than the normative information ($M = 6.45, sd = 1.92$), $F(1,42) = 28.114, p<.0001$. It should be noted that the internality questionnaire was considered as more important for the external applicant ($M = 3.52, sd = 1.17$) than for the internal applicant ($M = 2.77, sd = 1.38$) ($F(1,42) = 11.689, p<.0014$). The same analysis has been also performed separately for scores obtained in the first session and in second session. Patterns of results are similar to those obtained with all participants: In both session, the professional information was considered as more important than the normative information and the internality questionnaire was estimated as more important for the external applicant than the internal applicant.

Correlation analysis

To further examine access to judgement criteria, we computed correlations between professional worth and subjective importance of both normative and professional information. These correlations were calculated for (1) all participants ($n = 44$) and (2) for participants of the first session only ($n = 22$). Note that the first
session can be considered as a complete between factorial design. Results are shown in table 2. Globally, patterns of correlations of the session 1 are very similar to ones obtained with all participants. In both cases, it appears that the only significant correlations concerned the external applicants. The significant negative correlations show that professional judgments were more severe when participants estimated that they used this counter-normative information. Thus, it seems that executives were aware of the impact of internality information only for external files.

DISCUSSION

Results support the normative approach to internality. Internal applicants are preferred to externals in a simulated professional context. Consistent with the general idea that internality is a constitutive part of evaluative practices, this effect occurs independently of the objective performance (professional worth). This experiment does not allow any conclusion about the validity of the search for internal applicants in a professional context. Nevertheless, the internality (social value) of the candidate remains an effective criterion for job selection when the objective performance is available. It is not certain that the internality score of an applicant is as efficient as his previous performance to
predict his future behavior in an organizational context, which can be conceived as a strong situation (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989). A norm is, by definition, neither true nor false, but regulates the social functioning. As it has been suggested, the norm of internality cannot be disassociated from evaluation practices involved in the exercise of liberal power: it is a necessity to anticipate people as internal to be able to evaluate them (see Beauvois & Le Poulquier, 1986); it is also people in position to evaluate others who adhere the most to the norm of internality. Therefore, it can be understandable that internal individuals are preferred because they are more socially insert in those kind of evaluation practices. Note that this claim should certainly be true particularly in our liberal society, which exhibits autonomy, and responsibility as social values for individuals. The differences between subjective weights of both information show that executives are more likely to justify their evaluation by professional rather than normative information. A normative information is not easily exhibited as a rationalization of personnel selection task. Professional information is moreover the only coherent explanation that executives can provide to justify their decision. It is certainly a consequence of the fact that most of the executives considered that this information was really important (the mean is high and the standard deviation is low), which by the way reduce the occurrence of meaningful correlations. In any case, further
investigations have to be done to provide a more complete understanding of the cognitive access to judgement criterion. A particularly stimulating question is: why were participants perceptive about the impact of the external file, and why they were not about the impact of the internal file? According to some theorists of the social learning approach to internality (e.g. Rotter, 1966), internality should be related to performance. In that way, an excellent performance (and perhaps a medium) is inconsistent with the external file. The perception of the external file could then become more important and problematic for participants. This could explain why they consciously used this criterion to justify their decision. However, this interpretation implies that executives are in some way naïve social learning theorists, which remains a questionable hypothesis.
References


Table 1. Means and standard deviations of judgement about the applicant (internal vs external; high vs medium performances)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Evaluation</th>
<th>All participants</th>
<th>Session 1</th>
<th>Session 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td>6.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F
Normativity effect
F(1,42)= 22.98**
(35.4%)  
F(1,40)= 12.15**
(23.3%)  
F(1,40)= 8.80**
(18%)  
Professional effect
F(1,42)= 24.95**
(37.3%)  
F(1,40)= 13.50**
(25.2%)  
F(1,40)= 12.16**
(23.3%)  
Interaction effect
F(1,42)= 2.242
F(1,40)<1
F(1,40)= 1.12

Note: proportion of variance (Eta squared) are in parentheses. "I": Internal; "E": External.
** p<.006
Table 2. Correlations (Bravais-Pearson’s $r$) between the professional judgement scale and the subjective importance of both normative and professional information for all participants and for session 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of applicant</th>
<th>All participants</th>
<th>Session 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>normative information</td>
<td>professional information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internal / excellent</td>
<td>0.095 (26)</td>
<td>0.135 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internal / medium</td>
<td>0.027 (18)</td>
<td>0.055 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external / excellent</td>
<td>-0.397* (26)</td>
<td>0.256 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external / medium</td>
<td>-0.504* (18)</td>
<td>0.314 (18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$
** $p < .0002$

Note: $p$ levels reported are based on one-tailed tests. $N$ is in parenthesis.