

Locating control: Psychology and the cultural production of ‘healthy subject positions’

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Abstract

This paper addresses some of the ways in which psychological constructs, which have been traditionally positioned as intra-psychic phenomena, may be more productively understood as local performances of intelligible ‘healthy subject positions’. More specifically, it focuses on the cultural location of psychological epistemologies, and the assumptions of universality (based upon the normative subject position ‘white middle-class heterosexual male’) that shape them. Through an analysis of traditional locus of control research, it explores the ways in which individualistic notions of ‘personality traits’ enact a form of governmentality over subjects who are expected to inhabit specific, fixed subject positions. Thus, traditional research on locus of control can be seen as instantiating the very subject positions that it seeks to measure. To counter this, the paper draws upon experience as a methodological tool in order to examine some of the ways in which neo-liberal discourses of control work to homogenise the broad range of experiences that construct intelligible subject positions. In particular, the focus is on the potentialities and limitations of drawing on such discourses of control to understand non-heterosexual experiences, and it is suggested that we need to examine how such experiences may render individuals complicit with heterosexist ‘practices of self’.

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Introduction

This paper focuses on some of the ways in which constructions of the category ‘personality trait’ work to produce intelligible ‘healthy subject positions’ within Western cultures. More specifically, it seeks to render visible assumptions surrounding the hegemonic subject position ‘middle-class heterosexual white male’, which may be understood as being foundational to the psychological construct ‘locus of control’. In doing so, it seeks to examine the exclusionary practices that have shaped the construct itself, and thus to locate it within a network of cultural practices that privilege certain understandings of subjectivity over others. In this way, personality traits are conceptualised as being arbitrary sites of difference, rather than as reflecting *a priori* intra-psychic phenomena. Yet at the same time it is suggested that the performance of personality traits (as performances of intelligible subject positions) works to reify constructs such as locus of control as reflecting important sites of difference within Western cultures (Butler 1993).

In order to better understand the discursive practices that shape constructs such as locus of control, I employ Stainton Rogers’ (1991, 1996) work in the area of critical health psychology to identify some of the cultural norms that inform psychological epistemologies in Western societies. Using an approach that Stainton Rogers terms ‘cultural critique’, I outline the networks of power that shape discourses of control, with particular focus on the exclusionary practices that lend such discourses their hegemonic position. I then engage in what Spicer and Chamberlain (1996) have termed an ‘integrative strategy to psychological constructs’, with the goal being a critical reformulation of the ways we understand locus of control. To illustrate some of these points, I draw on ‘experience’ as a methodological tool for understanding how particular subject positions are made available through discourses of control. Such an approach relies upon an understanding of experience that is critical of the realist assumption that experiences reflect external truths, and that individual people ‘have’ experiences. Rather, the perspective on experience that I employ in order to look at locus of control examines experience as one site that is implicated in the construction of the category ‘individual’. More specifically, I look at how discourses of control shape sexuality within particular contexts, and I suggest that it is important to develop understandings of subjectivity that focus on the limitations and

potentialities that arise from employing such discourses when attempting to understand non-heterosexual subjectivities.¹

Understanding the histories of ‘locus of control’

In her analysis of the history of ‘locus of control’, Walker (2001) outlines some of the ways in which researchers in the area have attempted to operationalise the construct. Walker proposes that the construct is currently understood as representing an individual’s learned expectancy that certain behaviours will have specific outcomes, according to whether they internalise or externalise outcomes. Strickland (1978) elaborates this further by suggesting that individuals with an internal locus of control will attribute outcomes to themselves, and conversely that individuals with an external locus of control will attribute outcomes to external forces, such as fate or other more powerful individuals. Strickland goes on to suggest that those individuals with an external locus of control will have poorer health outcomes than those with an internal locus of control. This is based on the idea that those with an external locus of control will perceive events as being out of their control, and hence make little attempt to exert control over aversive experiences.

Yet, as may be evident from this brief outline of the construct, a focus on the individual as *having* a locus of control effectively denies the social and cultural contexts in which discourses of control circulate. In relation to this point, it is thus somewhat paradoxical that in reviewing the history of the concept, Walker (2001) overlooks the network of social practices that have made possible the construction of the category personality traits. As a result, Walker is able to maintain that locus of control reflects an objective, *a priori* concept. Walker achieves this construction by producing an aetiology of the concept that details the ways in which researchers from various fields (e.g., social learning theory, attribution theory etc.) have contributed to the *dis*-covery of locus of control. This approach masks the ways in which such research actively produces psychological concepts. More specifically, it ignores the foundational assumptions about subjectivity that most often inform the types of research that are conducted in the area of locus on control.

Within such psychological research, the model of the subject that is typically assumed is that of the rational autonomous individual of neo-liberalism (Adlam et al. 1977). Furthermore, this individual is presumed to take a particular form within

Western cultures – that of the white, middle class, heterosexual male – a subject position that is founded upon the exclusion of people who are positioned outside of this hegemonic location (Riggs & Augoustinos 2004, Riggs & Selby 2003). These assumptions may be seen as structuring research in the area of locus of control, the result being that the theories developed are premised solely upon the experiences of heterosexual white males. Furthermore, a reliance upon what may be termed an ‘enlightenment model’ as the basis of the concept of locus of control works to reify binary understandings of subjectivity (Stainton Rogers 1996) - thus the individual is understood to be located solely within either side of the ‘control binary’ (in that they ‘have’ either an internal or external locus of control), and that they are autonomous (in that the behaviours of such individuals can be separated from the context in which their behaviours are performed). These assumptions work to mask the cultural practices that shape constructions of personality traits such as locus of control, and instead position them as representing ‘real objects’ that can be objectively measured by psychologists working in the area.

The cultural production of psychological research

In her book *Explaining Health and Illness*, Stainton Rogers (1991) identifies the discourse of ‘cultural critique’ as a useful way of understanding constructions of health. She suggests moreover that this discourse has enabled the development of an approach to understanding ‘health in terms of power, status and wealth’ (*ibid* p. 139). Through this lens, health is recognised as a social practice, where particular bodies are positioned as being ‘healthy’, whilst others are designated the role of being either ‘unhealthy’ or ‘ill’. Moreover, constructions of health are used to manage people through the production of intelligible ‘healthy subject positions’, as will be elaborated later.

The concept of locus of control is thus the product of a particular Western understanding of subjectivity. As Stainton Rogers suggests, it is an inherently ethnocentric concept that is shaped by a range of exclusionary practices. She suggests that the development of locus of control measures was based upon a population of exclusively middle-class individuals (*ibid* p. 169). In taking these findings, and aiming to generalise them to a wide range of populations, researchers in the area of locus of control have perpetuated the notion that Western cultures (and specifically

cultures based on the values of white, middle-class, heterosexual men) can be used as a model for humanity. This assumption is shaped through a reliance upon the tenets of positivism and the scientific method, which consider context and culture to be largely irrelevant, or more precisely, ‘extraneous variables’ that must be managed in order to produce ‘accurate results’ (Hollway, 1989). In these ways, psychology imposes its world-view upon diverse groups of people, a practice that is justifiably considered to be oppressive to those people who do not share it (Riggs, 2004a).

In accepting locus of control as a universal truth, psychologists working in the area thus conduct research from this standpoint. In other words, locus of control is operationalised, questionnaires are designed, and the concept reified as representing an *a priori* artefact. Research is then conducted with participants who are seen as measurable on a singular axis of control and as abstracted from the multiple ways in which they may experience control in their lives. Thus, research outcomes generated are based upon the experimenter’s ability to construct and implement a personality trait, rather than upon their ability to measure a ‘pre-existing object’. As a result, measures of locus of control may more correctly be understood as measures of the experimenter’s and participants’ shared knowledges of certain social constructs (Stainton Rogers 1996). Thus, in everyday language we talk about ourselves as ‘having or lacking control’, as being ‘victims of fate’, and as things being ‘beyond our control’. And it is because of this that locus of control may be more usefully conceptualised as a set of shared meanings that we perform to warrant our actions/non-actions *within a society that valorises control*.

The problem with mainstream locus of control research, then, is that rather than reflexively exploring the ways in which individuals ‘perform control’, psychologists claim to discover the truths behind the ways in which people conceptualise control in their lives (cf., Willig 2000). In this way, such research draws on everyday discourses of control to reify psychological epistemologies as having privileged access to ‘the truth’ (Bruner 1990). This demonstrates the complex interplay between the everyday talk of individuals, and the ways in which psychologists take up certain concepts. Thus, psychological research on locus of control can be seen to produce acceptable ‘healthy subject positions’ (e.g., the external vs the internal), while simultaneously ignoring the ways in which it constructs the objects that it measures (Lupton 1997). This is one example of way that the discipline of psychology ‘institutionalises’ abstract concepts (such as locus of

control), encouraging individuals to believe that they should possess such characteristics (Crossley 2000). Thus, when psychologists and lay people look to find examples of locus of control in everyday experiences, they will see them – which works to reify the construct as a truth (Armstrong 1994). The question that we should ask, then, is whether ‘locus of control’ is researched because it is performed, or is it performed because it is researched?

Constructing ‘healthy subject positions’

Psychology as a discipline plays a role in what Foucault (e.g., 1991, see also Lemke 2002) referred to as governmentality. Through the reification of constructs such as locus of control, psychology enacts regimes of truth that govern the ways in which individuals may position themselves in relation to states of health and well-being. One example of this may be the deployment of the notion of personality traits as a means to better client self-management. By utilising discourses of control, ‘clients’ are encouraged to believe that good mental health is the result of individual work – of the personal mastery of control (Lupton 1997). This neo-liberal conceptualisation of control achieves two outcomes: first, institutions such as psychology are absolved of blame for individual failure, and second, self-government is taken as being a defining aspect of freedom in the constitution of ‘healthy subjects’. Thus, as Stephenson (2003: 140) suggests in her work on HIV and subjectivity, people are directed to ‘enact their own regulation through attempts to realize a liberal notion of freedom’. In relation to psychology, then, the discipline does more than simply constrain the shapes that acceptable ‘healthy subject positions’ may take. Rather, it makes intelligible specific subject positions, and thus constitutes that which is deemed to be healthy (Riggs 2003).

In this regard, whilst it is suggested that cultural institutions such as psychology encourage individual autonomy and responsibility (which are assumed to be positive attributes), they do so through the delineation of specific intelligible subject positions. Thus, whilst an internal locus of control, for example, may be positioned as denoting an individual’s control over their life, this is only the case within a particular neo-liberal framework of control. In this way, such notions of control may more transparently be understood as denying or at least limiting control (as an ‘individual choice’) through the privileging of certain intelligible ‘healthy subject positions’ (Riggs, 2004b). This is not to suggest, however, that power is

unidirectional: individuals *can* challenge the forms of knowledge that psychology attempts to impose (Crossley 2000), but such a critical move depends upon the availability of alternative discourses. One way of generating such alternative understandings may thus be to focus on constructions of health – to look at health as a thoroughly social practice (Fox 1999).

In this way, and following on from the work of Spicer and Chamberlain (1996), it may be possible to critically reformulate the study of control within the area of health. This could entail an elaboration of constructs such as locus of control through the lens of a critical discursive psychology. Within this framework, ‘personality traits’ may be understood as artefacts that are produced relationally – through the relationships *between* people – rather than as being located ‘intra-psychically’. Such an approach could focus on the cultural practices that shape understandings of locus of control, such as the ways in which ‘control’ is done in everyday talk; the institutional discourses that shape intelligible ‘controlled’ subject positions; and the cultural and historical contexts that make possible particular understandings of control.

Researching Experience

The analysis that follows is based upon two ‘memories of experience’ that I have of control.² Using personal experience as a methodological tool is a relatively established technique within critical approaches to psychology, but it is one that is fraught with issues surrounding the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin it (Hollway 1989, Scott 1992). Central to these issues is the understanding of subjectivity that informs the use of experience as a method of analysis. As a result, any use of experience requires an accompanying theorisation of how experience is being used, and what this means for an understanding of the processes of subjectification.

Probyn (1993) provides a useful framework for understanding the potential for using experience as a deconstructive tool. From her work, three important points about experience can be identified: a) understanding the self as social practice through investigating axes of subjectivity, b) examining the exclusionary practices that such axes are founded upon and c) the possibility for politicality and change that such an approach engenders.

In regards to the first point, Probyn (1993) suggests that it is important to approach experience in a way that explores the nexus of epistemology and ontology. In this respect, she states that:

Experience can be made to work in two registers: at an ontological level, the concept of experience... testifies to the gendered, sexual and racial facticity of being in the social... [and] at an epistemological level, the self is revealed in its conditions of possibility; here experience is recognized as more obviously discursive... (*ibid.* 16).

From this perspective, the analysis of experience as a 'practice of self' creates a twofold effect; it allows for the voicing of particular experiences, and thus acknowledges the 'as if it were real' status of 'individual experience', whilst at the same time it encourages an examination of the ways in which experiences are generated through social practices (see also Riggs 2002). Such a reading of experience evidences an understanding of subjectivity that recognises the self as a social practice. By locating subject positions in this way, it is possible to examine experience not as a privileged site of 'real knowledge', but rather as a site of ongoing contestation and struggle over meaning making.

The second point that Probyn (1993) makes is that we may examine practices of exclusion through the analysis of experience. An understanding of the social construction of experience may allow for a more elaborate account of how subjectivity gains its appearance of continuity and 'naturalness'. This focus on social practices does not therefore negate understandings of the individual, or of psychic processes *per se*, but instead recognises the contingency of such constructions upon particular cultural frameworks. As a result, experience may be read as evidencing the range of intelligible subject positions available within any cultural framework. This is particularly evident when looking at discourses surrounding control and the available subject positions in relation to sexuality. Thus, certain experiences of control are valued over others in a society that privileges the accounts of white, heterosexual men. Moreover, certain experiences may be positioned as 'invalid experiences' if they do not conform to hegemonic discourses of subjectivity, sexuality and control (Riggs in press).

An important aspect of using experience to understand exclusion is, therefore, to recognise the ways in which any attempt at representation is almost always bound to result in the silencing of other voices. Thus, it is not sufficient simply to ‘voice marginalised experiences’, but rather those voices must also be subjected to an examination of the privileges they assume. Such reflexivity will hopefully be evident, where I not only seek to locate my own experiences of control as ‘outside the norm’, but also to look at how my experiences conform to neo-liberal discourses of control (cf. Wilkinson 1988).

Finally, Probyn (1993) suggests that ‘putting experience to work’ (especially those of the social critic), may allow for the ‘figuration of “something better”’ (3). Thus the problematisation of subjectivity that the analysis of experience may engender can be used to demonstrate the everyday practices through which power is wielded, resisted and reshaped. This requires a constant questioning of how dominant narratives are made possible, and an examination of which rhetorical strategies work to mask the enactment of dominance. By looking at experience as a site of subject construction, and by critiquing the exclusionary practices that construct certain people as ‘normal’ (or in this instance, as ‘doing control in healthy ways’), it may be possible to offer modes of resistance to these normalising practices.

From this perspective, the following analysis examines how experiences of control and sexuality have shaped and enabled resistances within my own life. When writing about my ‘memories of experience’ I do not claim to be reporting ‘accurate’ or ‘objective’ accounts of my experiences. Obviously, they are reported through a reflective lens – looking back to a time where it would appear that control was most central to my own understandings of self. In this way, and in keeping with a sentiment expressed by Hollway (1989), experiences may thus be reported not as ‘fact’, but as ever changing interpretations of our subjectivities. Such an approach refuses the reification of experience as reflecting a ‘real truth’, and instead examines it for the cultural frameworks that it draws upon.

In discussing my experiences of control and the outcomes I have experienced, I aim to utilise ‘locus of control speak’ to demonstrate the multiple ways in which I have performed control. This is not intended to position myself as possessing either an external or internal locus of control, but should instead be read as an interactional, context dependent narrative of control. Thus at times I may refer to myself as enacting external behaviours, but such performances can only be understood in the situation

within which they occurred. My hope is that in using locus of control speak, I can present a subversive reading of locus of control that demonstrates its flexible and multiple enactments. Whilst it could be suggested that using this style of explanation runs the risk of reinforcing locus of control as representing a fixed, knowable entity, I believe that this is a necessary risk to take in order to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of all forms of knowledge.

‘Doing control’: Performing personality

During my middle school years I experienced considerable harassment due to other students perceiving me to be gay. This harassment resulted in a range of negative experiences for me, including loss of friendships, frequent migraines and other ‘stress-related’ health problems, and finally, having to change schools. Yet throughout this time I continued to believe that I could choose to accept or reject these positionings, and that regardless of what other people thought of me, this was no direct reflection of the regard I had for myself.

Traditional accounts of ‘locus of control’ would have difficulty in accounting for this somewhat contradictory report of my experiences of control. On the one hand, I relate an experience of being labelled as different by what may be termed more powerful others, and I suggest that this had a negative impact upon my experiences of health. Yet at the same time I suggest that this did not necessarily influence how I saw myself or the future. This account of control contradicts traditional locus of control research, in that my performances of control do not neatly reflect my location within a prescribed category of either internal or external. Rather, the experience suggests that whilst many aspects of my life at the time were controlled by more powerful others, I refused to perform what may be termed an external locus of control. Instead I would suggest that these ‘external forces’ only encouraged me to deny their all-encompassing control over my life.

In her review of the earlier locus of control work, Stainton Rogers (1991) highlights some of the less obvious formulations of the concept that may be seen as

making a space for a more complex account of control. She suggests that early critiques of the binary categories of internal/external (critiques which were not adequately incorporated in further research) pointed towards the need for a more detailed approach to understanding the role of powerful others, rather than simply assuming this to be a subset of the external position. In particular, she cites the work of Levenson (1973), who she suggests was unwilling to ‘accept the fatalistic label of externality since she felt that her frustrations [when she was forced to extend her studies in the area by an administrative ruling] were justified. *They were not the product of her own weakness, but of the oppression of others*’ (my emphasis, 168). In relation to my own experiences, this would seem to account to some degree for my own refusal to take on board a ‘fatalistic’ approach to control. That I could understand the harassment I experienced as being the result of oppressive social practices, rather than due to my own inherent ‘difference’, meant that the external control that I experienced did not necessarily become a formative aspect of my experiences of control.

In addition to this, whilst at the time the supposition that I was gay was used in negative ways against me, I could a) identify with these readings of ‘my sexuality’, and b) reject their categorisation as being inherently bad or wrong. Because I could identify with the label that I was positioned as inhabiting, the harassment that I experienced reflected my own understanding of one of the subject positions within which I was located. Because of this I could perceive control as being located ‘internal’ to myself: ‘powerful others’ only had the ability to label me because I enacted that label. This is not to suggest that there was something essentially gay about the subject position that I enacted. Rather, my beliefs about myself and my location within a particular intelligible subject position of sexuality (i.e., a gay male) meshed with the social stereotypes of what a gay male should ‘be’ like. In this way, I may be seen to have performed an internal locus of control, in that I believed I was in control of defining my own experiences, and that outcomes were the direct result of my actions.

Looking at this experience through the lens provided by Probyn (1993), it is possible to understand some of the ways in which exclusionary practices shaped my sense of self. My location within a particular intelligible subject position in regards to sexuality meant that my experiences, whilst intelligible, were not necessarily accorded any value. Yet, at the same time, my location as a *white, middle-class, gay male*³

meant that I had some expectation that my experiences should be heard, and that I had the right to voice them – an expectation that may not be shared or affirmed by members of differing ‘minority groups’. This suggests that my experiences of exclusion, whilst in many ways challenging dominant narratives of control (particularly as formulated within locus of control research), did little to destabilise the discourses of control that exist within a neo-liberal society. As a result, the constructions of self that this first experience demonstrates both work to challenge notions of locus of control, whilst demonstrating my complicity with control as a narrative of (white, middle-class, male) selves. The second experience further explores my location within these discourses of control.

Having completed school and entered the work force, I became more aware of the ways in which social stereotypes impacted upon my experiences. As a result, I attempted to challenge such experiences of oppression by ‘speaking out’ about discrimination, by refusing to perform acceptable forms of masculinity and by rejecting the social stereotype of the ‘passive, effeminate gay male’. Whilst these attempts at subversion were occasionally successful, more often they resulted in me being denied access to certain privileges, or being treated as different. These outcomes resulted in me believing that I had little control over the ways in which I was positioned within social groups. Thus, for a period of time I ceased engaging in such resistances in order to reduce my feelings of being ‘out of control’.

In contrast to the first experience, where I challenged external forces by asserting my ability to define control on my own terms, this second experience highlights some of the social practices that have at times shaped my performance of an ‘external locus of control’. In performing an external locus of control, it may be suggested that I consciously abdicated control over many aspects of my life, under a type of ‘resistance is futile’ rubric. Thus, my lack of success in challenging heterosexist practices resulted in me withdrawing from such work, and I instead just accepted things as they were. This account would seem to match up quite closely with

what would be termed a clear example of an external locus of control within mainstream research. Yet whilst this may seem the case at first glance, I believe that paying attention to the relational ways in which personality traits are enacted may allow for a more substantial account of my experiences.

Hampson (1988) suggests that the concept of personality may be usefully understood as something that is produced through the social practices that constitute the norms and rules that shape subjectivities. In this way, locus of control is something that we do in order to manage the ways we are positioned in relation to other people, and within the social order more generally. Thus, if we are to accept that accounting for failure is a dominant discourse within understandings of subjectivity in Western cultures, then it is relatively simple to understand why I may have performed an external locus of control in response to a wide range of refusals and rejections from the heterosexist culture that I was critiquing.

Such an understanding of my experiences also challenges the moral assumptions that shape traditional notions of locus of control. Thus as Stainton Rogers (1996) and Spicer and Chamberlain (1996) suggest, within Western individualist cultures the norm of internality is taken to represent the most 'healthy' position to inhabit in relation to control. Yet such discourses may be understood as achieving their hegemonic position through the denigration of cultural groups that value notions of externality. To challenge this we may focus on the utility (political, cultural or otherwise) of employing what may be termed 'external traits' – by examining the institutionalised practices that reinforce exclusion, rather than blaming individuals for their being excluded (cf. Riggs 2004, Riggs & Selby, 2003).

In relation to my own experiences, it may be suggested from this second example that whilst it would appear that I performed only an external locus of control, this does not account for a wide range of experiences that I had at this time. Thus there were many aspects of my life that I *did* feel I had control over: I still had control over my position in relation to family and friends; I still believed that I could resist conformity on some levels. But many of my behaviours were an enactment of externality. Thus it may be understood that I simultaneously performed an internal and external locus of control, dependent on the situation and my relation to other individuals in the context. This multiplicity of control demonstrates one of the limitations that arise from traditional accounts of locus of control, and renders visible the very complex ways in which discourses of control are shaped by the diverse

moral, political and interpersonal values that circulate within Western cultures (Adams, Braun & McCreanor 2004).

To bring this analysis of ‘externality’ back to the points raised by Probyn (1993), it is important to look again at how my attempts at control may have rendered me complicit with neo-liberal understandings of self-regulation. Thus, as I suggested earlier from the work of Stephenson (2003), it is often the case that we enact control over ourselves when we strive to achieve ‘freedom’ on the terms set within a neo-liberal society. Thus in the second experience I found myself disenchanted by my inability to change the exclusionary social practices that I experienced. Yet I would suggest that perhaps this arose as a result of my reification of the terms set in relation to gender and sexuality under heteropatriarchy. My feeling out of control thus only makes sense if control is privileged as an important site of critique. In this way, my location within discourses of control (even within my desire to control my own location) did little to challenge the systems of representation that shape subjectivities in Western cultures. This second experience thus renders visible the social practices of exclusion that inform discourses of control, and how these practices often work to co-opt us precisely at the point where we attempt to resist them (Riggs 2004b).

Reflecting on Experiences of Control

In describing my experiences of ‘doing locus of control’, I have hoped to demonstrate the multiple ways in which I have performed control, and the ways in which control cannot be meaningfully understood outside of the context within which it is enacted. In relation to my diverse experiences of control, the outcomes would appear to be shaped by the cultural meanings that informed my performances of control. It may thus be more useful to understand outcomes as dependent upon the social value that control performances hold, rather than on whether or not an individual has a particular ‘type’ of locus of control.

In other words, whether or not my performances of control were intelligible within neo-liberal discourses of control may be a better predictor of outcomes than a (supposedly) universal personality trait. For example, in the first experience I could be seen as competently doing neo-liberal control, in that I understood my own exercising of control to be indicative of my freedom. In the second experience, whilst it may appear at first that I lacked control, and that this resulted in my ‘performance of

externality', I would instead suggest that I was still firmly located within the discourses of control that I had sought to challenge – I still accepted the terms of neo-liberal control as central to my challenges to heterosexism.

A final important point in regards to my performances of control: whilst I have highlighted my experiences of control as a gay man, it is important to recognise the privileges that accrue to me as a *white middle-class gay male* (cf. Riggs & Riggs 2004). More specifically, all of the contexts that I outlined in the examples are framed by this positioning. Thus, whilst I have experienced many negative events as a result of my location within the subject position 'gay male' (and other people's responses to this), I have at the same time had the relative liberty of being white and middle-class in order to challenge the heteronormative assumptions that have informed the harassment that I have experienced. In these very complex ways my performances of control have been shaped by a much wider set of discursive practices than just my location as a gay male.

Likewise, my performances of control are shaped by my knowledges of control as a 'competent member' of Western cultures. My successes in deploying a range of performances of control may thus be understood as being contingent upon my white privilege, or more precisely, my access to these particular knowledges around control. Again, these points demonstrate the importance of examining the contexts within which performances of control are enacted, and to be wary of accepting simplistic explanations of how people are positioned in relation to discourses of control.

Conclusions

One question that may arise from the preceding exploration of performances of control is; why should we bother at all with the concept of locus of control? I believe that Hooks (2003) answers this question in her work on 'self-esteem' amongst African-Americans: concepts such as self-esteem and locus of control have long been used to justify the privilege that white, middle-class heterosexual men (amongst others) experience within Western society. Thus, the supposedly positive ends of the spectrum (high self-esteem; internal locus of control) have traditionally been reserved for successful members of this dominant group. If we are to discard the concepts at the very point where oppressed groups achieve the rights to define themselves in

relation to discourses of control, then access to the systems of representation that support hegemonic epistemologies will always be denied to us/them. In saying this, I am by no means seeking to equate my own experiences as a white, middle-class, gay man with those of African-American people in general. Rather I am hoping to illustrate the potential utility of concepts such as locus of control.

Having said that, and as I have made clear throughout the analysis through the application of Stephenson's (2003) work on neo-liberalism and Probyn's (1993) work on experience, we do need to be wary of how we understand control, and how this may buy into a self-regulating belief in freedom. In contrast to this, it may prove worthwhile to maintain a focus on how control may be reconceptualised so as to engender a more productive political response to exclusionary practices of health and subjectivity. Such an approach requires a re-examination of how we understand control, and specifically, where we locate it.

If we are to understand control as something that is produced relationally, then we may be better placed to understand the practices of governmentality that shape intelligible 'healthy subject positions'. In other words, instead of positioning locus of control as being an intra-psychic phenomenon that is causally related to health care outcomes, it may be more productive to examine the ways in which performances of expected personality traits impact upon health care outcomes. Thus, psychologists may find it more useful to research the ways in which an individual's complicity with psychological regimes of truth affects the ways they perceive the situations in which they are located (cf. Chamberlain, Stephens and Lyons 1997). In this way, an understanding of the context of culture is an important point to consider when exploring practices of control.

Also related to this is the need for a more detailed understanding of the multiple ways in which control is understood by diverse groups of people. Thus, it would be far too simplistic to suggest that control (or for that matter, 'personality traits' more generally) is a solely Western phenomenon. To do so would be to ascribe Western cultures with *a priori* access to defining what counts as 'real' (cf., Riggs, 2004a). In her work on the emotional health of British Pakistanis, Rabia Malik (2000) demonstrates the ways in which depression is understood across cultures, and that whilst the Western understanding of the term has little currency in Pakistani culture, there are alternate words that carry similar meanings, albeit founded upon differing histories and world-views. In this way a focus on the local, context dependent ways in

which control is performed may allow for a more productive means to researching the subject area.

So, in conclusion, I have hoped to outline the assumptions that have shaped much of the research in the area of locus of control. In order to illustrate this, I have provided some examples of my own experiences that highlight the multiple and fluid ways in which we perform control. I have suggested that rather than assuming control to be a universal category of understanding, we need to explore the ways in which it is enacted relationally, and according to a range of cultural practices. In focusing primarily on the practices of white, heterosexist culture I have hoped to contribute to the ongoing visibilisation of the heteronormative and ethnocentric assumptions that shape discourses of control (for example) within Western cultures. In order to challenge such discourses we need to develop alternate means of accounting for how and why people perform certain subject positions, and what this may mean for research in the area of health more generally.

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Firstly I would like to acknowledge that I live on Kurna land, and that the white colonisation of this country continues to disadvantage Indigenous peoples, and accrue unearned privileges to white people such as myself. I would like to thank Louise Roufeil, Martha Augoustinos, Shona Crabb and two anonymous reviewers for stimulating conversations and suggestions on this paper. And as always, thanks to Greg for support and proof reading.

Notes

¹ This term is used within the paper rather than either of the more common monikers 'LGBT' or 'queer'. My decision to do so reflects my view of such language use, whereby I acknowledge that the term can tend to re-position heterosexuality as normative, but at the same time this is precisely the point of this paper, and thus the use of the term draws attention to a) the reliance of heterosexuality upon 'its other' in order to maintain its normative positioning, and b) the ways in which we as 'non-heterosexual' identified people may be made complicit with heteropatriarchy through

our reliance upon normative discourses of sexuality (see also Butler 1993, Riggs 2004b).

² I recognise here that referring to experiences as ‘something that I have’ may in fact contradict the suggestion that experiences constitute the category ‘individual’. However, in order to maintain a relatively readable text, I employ this term of reference advisedly, and thus recognise the risks of reification that I run in doing so.

³ I emphasise my location as a male as well to acknowledge that being gay does not put me outside of the framework of patriarchy which privileges men in general.

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