

What is Locus of Control?

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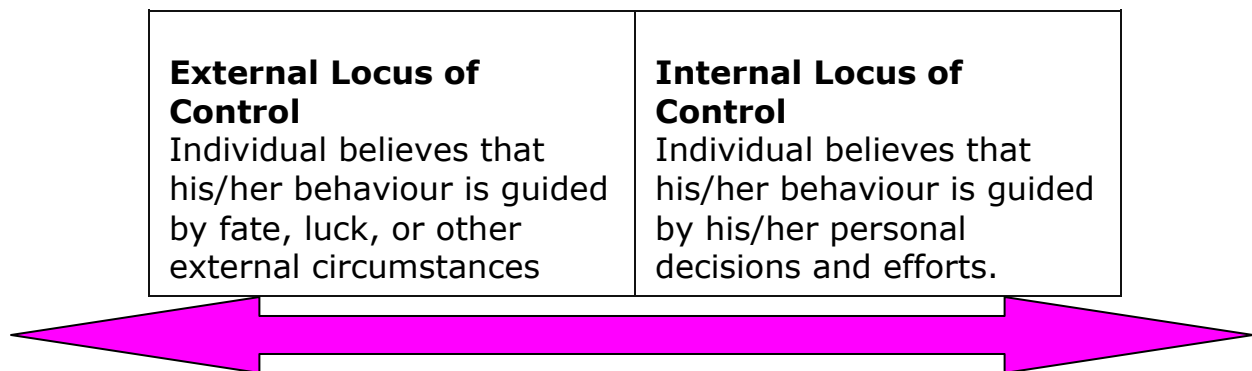
Within psychology, Locus of Control is considered to be an important aspect of personality. The concept was developed originally by Julian Rotter in the 1950s ([Rotter, 1966](#)).

Locus of Control refers to an individual's perception about the underlying main causes of events in his/her life. Or, more simply:
Do you believe that your destiny is controlled by *yourself* or by *external forces* (such as fate, god, or powerful others)?

The full name Rotter gave the construct was Locus of Control of Reinforcement. In giving it this name, Rotter was bridging behavioural and cognitive psychology. Rotter's view was that behaviour was largely guided by "reinforcements" (rewards and punishments) and that through contingencies such as rewards and punishments, individuals come to hold beliefs about what causes their actions. These beliefs, in turn, guide what kinds of attitudes and behaviours people adopt. This understanding of Locus of Control is consistent, for example, with Philip Zimbardo (a famous psychologist):

A locus of control orientation is a belief about whether the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation)." (Zimbardo, 1985, p. 275)

Thus, locus of control is conceptualised as referring to a unidimensional continuum, ranging from *external* to *internal*:



Is an internal locus of control desirable?

In general, it seems to be psychologically healthy to perceive that one has control over those things which one is capable of influencing.

In simplistic terms, a more internal locus of control is generally seen as desirable. Having an Internal locus of control can also be referred to as "self-agency", "personal control", "self-determination", etc. Research has found the following trends:

- Males tend to be more internal than females
- As people get older they tend to become more internal
- People higher up in organisational structures tend to be more internal ([Mamlin, Harris, & Case, 2001](#))

However, it's important to warn people against lapsing in the overly simplistic view notion that internal is good and external is bad (two legs good, four legs bad?). There are important subtleties and complexities to be considered. For example:

- Internals can be psychologically unhealthy and unstable. An internal orientation usually needs to be matched by competence, self-efficacy and opportunity so that the person is able to successfully experience the sense of personal control and responsibility. Overly internal people who lack competence, efficacy and opportunity can become neurotic, anxious and depressed. In other words, internals need to have a realistic sense of their circle of influence in order to experience 'success'.
- Externals can lead easy-going, relaxed, happy lives.

Despite these cautions, psychological research has found that people with a more internal locus of control seem to be better off, e.g., they tend to be more achievement oriented and to get better paid jobs. However, thought regarding causality is needed here too. Do environmental circumstances (such as privilege and disadvantage) cause LOC beliefs or do the beliefs cause the situation?

Sometimes Locus of Control is seen as a stable, underlying personality construct, but this may be misleading, since the theory and research indicates that that locus of control is largely learned. There is evidence that, at least to some extent, LOC is a response to circumstances. Some psychological and educational interventions have been found to produce shifts towards internal locus of control (e.g., outdoor education programs; [Hans, 2000](#); [Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997](#)).