

External Locus of Control

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1. Core Definition

An **external locus of control** represents a belief system wherein an individual perceives that outcomes in their life, whether positive or negative, are predominantly determined by forces outside of their personal agency. Such forces might include chance, fate, luck, powerful others, or uncontrollable environmental circumstances. This cognitive orientation stands in contrast to an **internal locus of control**, where individuals believe that their own actions, efforts, and decisions are the primary determinants of their life experiences. The concept is central to understanding how individuals attribute causality for events, influencing their motivation, emotional responses, and behavioral patterns.

Individuals exhibiting a pronounced external locus of control often vocalize sentiments that suggest a resignation to external forces. They might attribute academic success to an easy test rather than diligent study, or career advancement to being in the "right place at the right time" instead of their professional competence. Conversely, failure might be rationalized as a consequence of unfair treatment, bad luck, or insurmountable obstacles, rather than insufficient effort or poor choices. This attributional style has profound implications for how individuals approach challenges, learn from experiences, and engage with their environment.

The distinction between internal and external loci of control is not merely academic; it permeates everyday experiences and shapes fundamental aspects of an individual's psychological landscape. While the spectrum of locus of control is continuous, with most people falling somewhere between the two extremes, a predominant external orientation implies a worldview where personal efficacy is diminished and where efforts to exert control are perceived as largely futile. This foundational belief system influences a wide array of psychological constructs, from self-efficacy and resilience to coping strategies and overall mental well-being.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of locus of control was formally introduced by American psychologist **Julian B. Rotter** in 1954, and further elaborated in his seminal 1966 article, "Generalized Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement." Rotter, influenced by social learning theory, proposed that an individual's behavior is guided by their expectations about the outcomes of their actions. He posited that these generalized expectancies could be categorized along a continuum: those who believe that reinforcements are contingent upon their own behavior possess an internal locus of control, while those who believe that reinforcements are controlled by external forces possess an

external locus of control.

Rotter's work emerged from a broader context of personality psychology and learning theories, seeking to understand individual differences in how people perceive their ability to influence events. Prior psychological theories had largely focused on innate traits or environmental conditioning. Rotter's contribution provided a critical cognitive dimension, emphasizing the role of individual beliefs and perceptions in mediating the relationship between behavior and outcome. His theory offered a powerful framework for explaining why individuals, even in similar objective circumstances, might react with vastly different levels of motivation, persistence, and emotional adjustment.

Following Rotter's initial conceptualization, numerous researchers expanded upon the theory, developing various scales to measure locus of control across different domains (e.g., health, academics). The concept quickly gained traction across various subfields of psychology, including clinical, educational, and social psychology, owing to its explanatory power in understanding diverse human behaviors and experiences. Its robustness has allowed it to remain a fundamental construct in personality theory, continually refined and applied to contemporary psychological research.

3. Key Characteristics and Manifestations

A central characteristic of individuals with an external locus of control is a consistent tendency to attribute outcomes to factors beyond their personal influence. This manifests as a belief that events are primarily governed by **chance, luck, or fate**, rather than by personal effort or skill. For instance, in a competitive scenario, an individual with an external locus of control might attribute their success to a stroke of luck or their failure to bad luck, rather than analyzing their performance or preparation. This perspective can lead to reduced initiative, as the perceived link between effort and outcome is weakened.

Another significant manifestation is the attribution of control to **powerful others** or societal systems. Individuals with an external locus of control might believe that their well-being, career trajectory, or personal happiness is primarily dictated by the decisions of authority figures, governmental policies, or the whims of influential individuals. This can lead to feelings of disempowerment and a reluctance to challenge existing structures, as the perceived ability to effect change is minimized. In academic settings, such students might blame a strict teacher or an unfair grading system for poor performance, rather than reflecting on their study habits.

Furthermore, individuals with an external locus of control often exhibit a tendency towards **passivity and helplessness** when faced with adversity. If one believes that their actions have little bearing on results, there is less incentive to persist in the face of obstacles. This can result in a diminished capacity for problem-solving and a greater likelihood of giving up prematurely. While

this orientation can sometimes serve as a protective mechanism against self-blame in instances of genuine helplessness, a pervasive external locus of control generally correlates with lower levels of motivation, resilience, and personal responsibility, thereby influencing their decision-making processes and long-term goal attainment.

4. Impact on Well-being and Coping Mechanisms

The impact of an external locus of control on an individual's well-being and their preferred coping mechanisms is multifaceted, presenting both potential benefits and significant drawbacks. In certain contexts, especially when confronted with unavoidable adversity or traumatic events, an external attribution of causality can serve as a psychologically adaptive strategy. For instance, when dealing with a catastrophic natural disaster or an irremediable personal loss, believing that the event was "out of their hands" or a matter of "bad luck" can help an individual to externalize blame, thereby mitigating feelings of guilt, shame, or intense personal responsibility that might otherwise lead to debilitating self-criticism and prolonged emotional distress. This transient shift can facilitate initial emotional processing and prevent overwhelming self-reproach, allowing for psychological recovery.

However, the sustained and pervasive adoption of an external locus of control often leads to detrimental long-term psychological consequences. A consistent belief that one's fate is primarily determined by external forces can foster a profound sense of **helplessness**. If personal effort is perceived as futile, individuals may become passive, neglecting opportunities for personal growth and constructive action. This can manifest as a lack of motivation to pursue goals, a reluctance to engage in problem-solving, and a general feeling of resignation regarding future outcomes. Such an orientation can undermine self-efficacy, as repeated experiences of perceived lack of control reinforce the belief that personal agency is ineffective.

Ultimately, a dominant external locus of control can contribute to a significant **loss of personal control** over one's life. This diminished sense of agency is strongly correlated with poorer mental health outcomes, including increased susceptibility to depression, anxiety, and generalized stress. Individuals may avoid taking necessary steps to improve their circumstances, such as seeking professional help, developing new skills, or advocating for themselves, because they believe such actions will ultimately be ineffective. The dynamic interplay between this attributional style and an individual's coping strategies thus dictates their resilience and overall psychological adjustment in the face of life's challenges, underscoring the critical importance of understanding and potentially modifying this cognitive orientation.

5. Measurement and Assessment

The assessment of locus of control has primarily relied on self-report questionnaires and scales

designed to quantify an individual's tendencies toward internal or external attributions. The most widely recognized and historically significant instrument is **Rotter's Internal-External (I-E) Scale**, developed by Julian Rotter in 1966. This scale typically consists of a series of forced-choice items, where respondents select between two statements, one reflecting an internal attribution and the other an external attribution. For example, a question might ask whether getting a good job depends mainly on hard work (internal) or knowing the right people (external). The cumulative score then indicates an individual's predominant locus of control.

While Rotter's I-E Scale provided a foundational measurement tool, subsequent research led to the development of more specialized and domain-specific instruments. Researchers recognized that an individual's locus of control might vary across different areas of life, such as health, academics, or interpersonal relationships. Consequently, scales like the Multidimensional Health Locus of Control (MHLC) Scales, developed by Wallston, Wallston, and DeVellis, emerged to specifically assess beliefs about control over health outcomes, often distinguishing between internal, external (chance), and powerful others (doctors, fate) dimensions. These more nuanced measures allow for a finer-grained understanding of how locus of control operates in specific contexts.

Challenges in measurement include the potential for social desirability bias, where individuals might report a more internal locus of control than they genuinely possess due to societal valuing of personal responsibility. Furthermore, cultural differences can influence responses, as some cultures may emphasize collective responsibility or fate more than Western individualistic societies. Despite these complexities, these instruments remain invaluable tools in psychological research and clinical practice, offering insights into personality, motivation, and potential interventions aimed at fostering a more adaptive sense of control where appropriate.

6. Relationship with Mental Health and Behavior

The pervasive influence of an external locus of control extends significantly into an individual's mental health landscape and their patterns of behavior. Research consistently demonstrates a correlation between a predominantly external locus of control and heightened vulnerability to various psychological distresses. Individuals who attribute their outcomes to external forces are often more susceptible to conditions such as **depression and anxiety disorders**. The chronic feeling of powerlessness, coupled with the belief that one cannot influence significant life events, can erode self-efficacy and lead to learned helplessness, a state where individuals cease to attempt to control their environment even when opportunities arise. This can manifest as a persistent sense of futility, contributing to the core symptoms of depression.

Behaviorally, an external locus of control can lead to a range of maladaptive responses. In academic and professional settings, it may manifest as reduced persistence in tasks, lower levels of motivation, and a tendency to procrastinate, as the individual perceives their efforts to be largely

inconsequential. In health behaviors, those with an external locus of control may be less likely to engage in preventative measures, adhere to treatment regimens, or take proactive steps to manage chronic conditions, believing that their health outcomes are primarily a matter of chance or the responsibility of medical professionals. This passive approach can lead to poorer long-term health trajectories.

Conversely, the cultivation of a more internal locus of control is generally associated with greater psychological well-being, enhanced resilience, and more proactive coping strategies. However, it is important to note that an extreme internal locus of control, where individuals feel solely responsible for everything, including truly uncontrollable events, can also be detrimental, leading to excessive self-blame and burnout. The optimal psychological state often involves a nuanced understanding of what is within one's control and what is not, allowing for appropriate efforts where agency exists and adaptive acceptance where it does not. Therapeutic interventions often aim to help individuals identify areas where they can exert influence, thereby fostering a more balanced and adaptive locus of control.

7. Sociocultural Factors and Criticisms

The development and expression of an external locus of control are not solely individual psychological phenomena but are also significantly shaped by **sociocultural factors**. Cultural norms, societal structures, and prevailing ideologies can profoundly influence how individuals perceive their agency and control over life events. For instance, cultures that emphasize collectivism, fate, or submission to divine will may foster a more external locus of control among their members, which is considered adaptive within that cultural context. Conversely, individualistic cultures often promote an internal locus of control, valuing self-reliance and personal achievement. Economic disparities, social injustice, and systemic oppression can also contribute to an external locus of control, as individuals facing such barriers may realistically perceive their lack of control over their life circumstances.

Despite its widespread acceptance and utility, the concept of locus of control has faced several **criticisms and debates**. One primary critique concerns its potential for oversimplification. Early conceptualizations often treated locus of control as a global, unitary trait, failing to account for its domain-specific nature. As discussed, an individual might exhibit an internal locus of control regarding their academic performance but an external one concerning their political influence. More recent models acknowledge this multidimensionality, but the initial broad application was a point of contention.

Another important criticism revolves around the dynamic nature of locus of control. While often measured as a stable personality trait, research suggests that locus of control can be influenced by life experiences, interventions, and developmental stages. Treating it as entirely fixed might

overlook opportunities for growth and change. Furthermore, the inherent value judgment often associated with "internal" being good and "external" being bad has been challenged. As noted earlier, an external locus of control can be adaptive in certain uncontrollable situations, highlighting the need for a balanced perspective rather than an absolute preference for internality. These criticisms have led to refinements in theory and measurement, enriching our understanding of this complex and vital psychological construct.

Further Reading

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