

A LINE ON LIFE

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Who Controls Your Life? *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Going home, you plan to relax by watching a video you have been looking forward to for a long time. You find that the rental store has no more copies of the video you want. Nothing else appeals to you. Would you be more likely to say, "*What rotten luck!*" or "*It's my own fault! I should have picked up the video earlier!*"?

The statement you choose reflects your **locus of control**. Those who blame luck are more likely to believe they are controlled by **external** forces, while people who blame themselves view causal factors as **internal**. If externally oriented, people view rewards and punishments as beyond their control. They see outcomes as due to fate, luck or powerful others. In contrast, if people are internally oriented, they believe that *they* are the source of your own rewards.

Externals think that success is a matter of "*being in the right place at the right time.*" As believers in chance or fate, they buy lottery tickets, read horoscopes, and own lucky charms. Life is seen as a matter of chance. At the extreme, they see life as a case of "*whatever will be, will be.*"

At the opposite pole, internals see themselves as masters of their own fate. They will buy self-improvement books rather than lottery tickets. They think their success depends on hard work. Getting ahead depends more on *what* you know rather than *whom* you know.

In 1966, psychologist Julian Rotter devised a **Locus of Control Scale** that requires that people choose between 17 pairs of statements. Some examples are shown below.

- A. In the long run, people get the respect they deserve in the world.
- B. Unfortunately, an individual's worth often passes unrecognized no matter how hard he tries.

- A. In my case, getting what I want has little to do with luck.
- B. Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.

Externals would choose "B" in both cases, while internals would choose "A." Although most of us would fall in the middle of the scale, some people's choices indicate one extreme or the other.

Externals are more likely to conform to the wishes of others. They think they can't control what happens to them, so they rely on others for direction. They adopt the opinions of authority figures. In contrast, internal people are more independent and resist

attempts at control by others. Internals pay more attention to the contents of opinions rather than the reputation of the source.

Intelligence. In contrast to externals, internals tend to be more intelligent. If internals are more intelligent, they are more capable of controlling what happens to them. Internals are more success oriented than externals. Do these traits lead them to do better in school? In two studies (1975, 1977) psychologists found that internals do better academically. In 1978 study, another psychologist found that elementary students who were internals earned higher grades than their external classmates. However, he did not find differences in grades among internal and external college students.

Disasters. In 1972, two psychologists noticed a curious fact — locus of control was related to ways people respond to disasters. Over many years, they found that fewer people were killed by tornadoes in Illinois than Alabama. However, both states have about equal numbers of such storms. They hypothesized that a higher proportion of people living in Alabama reacted to tornado warnings with resignation (external) rather than preparation (internal). Their research supported their hypothesis. A significantly higher percentage of Alabamians agreed with external locus-of-control statements.

Health. Tornadoes are mostly out of our control, but health care is another matter. We can control more aspects of our health. However, the locus of control also effects how we deal with our health. Externals are more passive — they take fewer precautions to protect their health, engage in fewer physical activities, and look for less information about maintaining their health.

In contrast, those with internal locus of control work harder for good health. This can mean that internals will take more responsibility for their health needs. They are more likely to take action to prevent or remedy ill health. They are more likely to seek out information about their health. On the other hand, some internals may decide they can "*cure themselves*" and ignore medical advice.

If physicians can tell if their patients believe in internal or external locus of control, they can vary their procedures accordingly. Externals are more likely to respond to structure imposed by others, requiring more active supervision. Internals would respond better if given the advantages and disadvantages of a variety of alternatives — allowing them to make the choice.

**If you have control,
it is often very hard to surrender it to others.**

Fortunately, most of us vary our locus of control, depending on the situation. In situations that are familiar to us, we tend to have an internal locus of control — we rely on our own judgment. In unfamiliar situations, we adopt a more external view — we trust those who have more expertise than we do. Even so, with all of us, there are times when it is hard to

decide which way to go. Do we try to keep the control ourselves, or do we surrender it to others?

* Adapted from Charles C. Morris' *Psychology: An Introduction*, Prentice-Hall Publishers, 1990, page 470.