

Personal Control and Domains

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Through early experiences, people develop a growing sense of what they can control. One of the first ways researchers began to examine control was to define the degree to which an individual believes control is self-determined (i.e., internal locus of control) or not (i.e., external locus of control). An internal locus of control has traditionally been considered the “favored” profile, being associated with low levels of depression and other common psychopathology. A more modern view of locus of control suggests that a balance between both internal and external loci of control may foster the most adaptive outlook, and that it may be more important to have a realistic sense of control, rather than overwhelmingly internal or external one (Schwarzer, 2014). For example, clinicians may encounter self-assured, confident persons who have recently suffered a traumatic event and must adjust their usual view of control to become more external to avoid pathological grief or self-blame.

Other researchers of control noted that the bipolar structure of the locus of control concept was lacking. For one, the external pole did not specify whether the control was held by other people or if it was just chance, and thus the implications of this distinction were not previously discussed. Additionally, locus of control perspectives only dealt with whether the individual believes they have an opportunity to change a situation or produce an outcome (contingency-based), and did not tap into whether the individual believes they are actually capable of enacting change (competency-

based). Through years of research, led perhaps most prominently by Bandura's (1997) "self-efficacy" or social cognitive theory, it has been shown that the combination of these control domains more accurately predicts behavior than objective level of control. This has been especially implicated in individuals struggling with depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, with previous successes being the biggest predictor of perceived competence.

Contemporary researchers are now investigating whether a predominant control belief system rules over all aspects of life in general, or if beliefs regarding specific domains are compartmentalized. Some of the more widely studied domains include physical health, mental health, cognitive ability, and interpersonal relationships. The general vs. specific distinction is most likely a complicated one, and the issue may be better explained case-by-case. Therapies that focus on enriching one's sense of control are paramount in populations whose independence is otherwise compromised, like those who have acquired blindness, paralysis, cancer, or other medical conditions.

The importance of these perceptions of control has been debated, researched, and theorized over many years, and questions remain about the best way to measure or define this trait. Currently, several measures do exist, and there are also many subcomponents of assessments that include sense of control. However, no "gold standard" exists. Regardless of how one chooses to measure personal control, it can be employed in two distinct and noticeable ways: direct or indirect. Direct actions are more typical to follow a sense of internal control in a given situation. They describe a situation in which a person actively tries to problem-solve or correct a given situation (e.g., starting a revolution). On the other hand, indirect actions are less self-explanatory, but arguably reflect a more external locus of control. These actions relate to behaviors that put oneself in line with the situation rather than doing something to change or

manipulate the situation (e.g., adjusting opinions/beliefs to be in line with the current regime).

Either style can be productive or harmful in a given situation, and thereby the ability to choose which type of action is best in a moment is an important skill to target in clinical settings.

Perhaps the most important determinant is the person-environment fit. Additionally, experiences can change one's perception of control, and one's perception of control can impact how experiences are encoded.

A sense of personal control is an influential characteristic at every stage of life, and thus age is a very important variable in this area of research. A wave-like pattern has been seen where locus of control internalizes around puberty, externalizes in freshman year of high school, internalizes again in adulthood, then externalizes in older age. Common predictors of a sense of personal control include health, mobility, cognition, intelligence, SES, and history of successes vs. failures. This latter predictor has been postulated to be the most important, as individuals can more easily feel in control of future situations if they can point to situations in their past where they felt control.

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Further Reading

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman.

Schwarzer, R. (2014). *Self-efficacy: Thought control of action*. New York: Taylor & Francis.