


Revisiting External vs Internal Locus of Control

By Gwen M. Scott RN, MC, RCC, Contributing Writer



I was raised in the '50's and '60s when a woman's highest goal was to get married and have children. This may sound so "other worldly" to younger therapists who have grown up in an age where the sense of being in control of one's life is so accepted. Or is it? Even today young men and woman tend to allow others to control them for the sake of the relationship. Helping my clients understand what caused them to operate from this disempowered position has been enlightening and freeing for them.

Many clients come to counselling with interpersonal problems, not understanding how to navigate through them in a healthy way. Problems with parents, friends, spouses and children are described with great emotion and detail. They believe that everyone but themselves has the right and the power to define their world. Clients become complicit with this agenda while simultaneously feeling angry, frustrated, victimized and "out of control". They attempt to put order in their world by controlling others. This ends poorly for all involved. When clients understand the dynamics of External vs Internal Locus of Control (LOC) they are able to apply it successfully to their lives, moving towards the Internal LOC position.

Recently one of my clients asked me to explain and diagram this concept in an understandable format which she could refer to at home. This article and diagram are the result of that request.

Locus of Control History

Julian Rotter's concept of "Locus of Control of Reinforcement" (1966) bridged the gap between behavioral and cognitive psychology. He proposed that behavior resulted from the use of rewards and punishments as reinforcements for desired behavior. Rotter's "Locus of Control" is a concept which refers to a uni-dimensional continuum, ranging

from external to internal. The External Locus position refers to the individual who believes that his/her behavior is guided by external circumstances, while the Internal Locus position refers to the individual who believes that his/her behavior is guided by personal decisions and effort.

Rotter believed that Internals shared two essential characteristics: having a high achievement motivation, and have low "other directedness". Internals believe that they control their own destiny while Externals attribute their experiences to fate, chance or luck.

Locus of Control is generally believed to be a learned behavior which is developed from family, culture, and past experiences which lead to rewards. Internals tend to come from families that focused on effort, education and responsibility. Externals usually come from families of low socioeconomic status where there is lack of life control.

Rotter developed a 23-item forced choice scale (1966) to measure locus of control. Later, Duttweiler (1984) developed an alternate 28-item scale which she called the Internal Control Index (ICI). This scale has good psychometric properties and good internal reliability.

Other theorists have expanded on Rotter's concept to include the third construct of Chance (Hannah Levenson, 1973); Bernard Weiner's observation of stable vs unstable causes of attribution (1970); and, in 1978 Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale expanded on Weiner's attributional style to include long-term vs short-term factors. For the purpose of this article, I have used Rotter's original concept of

progression on the continuum from External to Internal Control.

I find it fascinating that while Rotter was devising his Locus of Control model, Betty Friedan gave birth to what became known as the "feminist movement". Both were addressing the self-defeating position of allowing the pressures of society and others to define oneself and how one's life should be lived. While Rotter presented his LOC model to his colleagues in psychological journals, Friedan focused on women's plight, giving birth to a sociopolitical movement known as the National Organization of Women (NOW).

Other Observations Regarding Locus of Control

It is generally believed that people with an Internal LOC are psychologically healthier because Internals would be more likely to have better boundaries in their relationships and be in charge of their own destiny. Historically, males tended to be more internally controlled than females. Males were socialized to "be in charge" and had educational advantages. However, this dynamic has shifted as women became better educated, had more career options, and assumed more control over their lives.

Locus of Control is largely learned through behavioral modification. Warm, supportive and encouraging parenting seem essential for development of an Internal locus. Humans are born in the External LOC position, initially needing much care and attention. As the child develops, he/she naturally gravitates to assume an Internal LOC. Adolescence is a difficult time for both parent and child as they wrestle over "what is right?" and "what is normal?".

As humans age, we tend to assume a more Internal LOC. However, the aging process may also mean the loss of the ability to cope both mentally and physically. This results in a return to an External LOC. This too is unsettling for all members of the family.

Internals need to be balanced by their own competency, as well as allowing realistic influence by significant others

in their lives. If this doesn't happen, they could become neurotic, anxious and depressed. On the other hand, Externals can lead relaxed, happy lives within a caring, respectful community.

Clinical Applications for Locus of Control

The LOC model can be applied to a wide variety of disciplines, including Educational Psychology, Health Psychology, Sports Psychology, Industrial and Organizational Psychology.

Clinical Psychologists and Therapists have a large range of clients who can be empowered to assume control over their own lives. These include teaching parenting skills, stress and anxiety reduction, abusive relationships, substance abuse, and relationship dynamics.

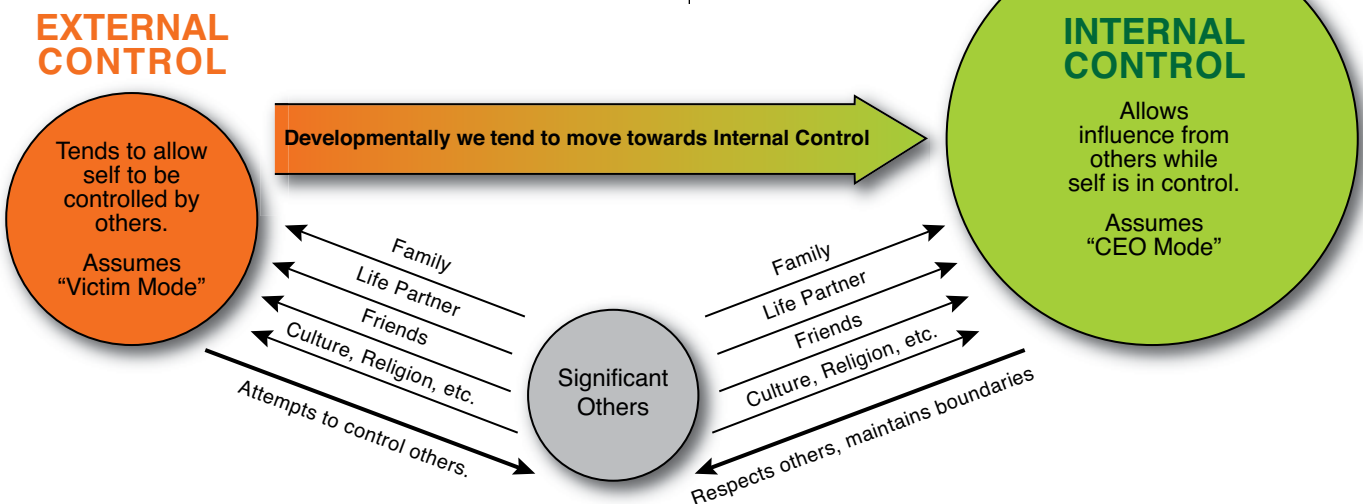
How To Encourage Internal Locus of Control

The therapist's understanding of the LOC model allows him/her to recognize where on the continuum of External LOC to Internal LOC the client operates from. The client's story will illustrate how / where they are assuming the disempowered/victim mode in relationships. The following diagram can be used as a template.

The key to Internal LOC development is facilitated when clients realize that they have choices. Therefore, coach clients on how to brainstorm, use critical thinking, set and maintain reasonable boundaries.

Assist the client to expose and challenge the internal critical "gremlin" that assesses and condemns them, using Albert Ellis' irrational beliefs model.

I have used the following diagram for some time now with my clients. They have found the diagram to be helpful in identifying self-defeating behavior in their relationships. One client identified the diagram as the most significant input she had received in therapy. I trust that my colleagues will find it as useful as I have.





Who's In Control? Client Worksheet for Internal vs External Control

1. Who/what is controlling your life? Where would you plot yourself between the two positions of External vs Internal Control?
2. Human beings are born in the External Control position. Survival is contingent on their being taken care of in every way.
3. As children grow and mature, they naturally move toward the Internal Control position.
 - at first, the parents are grateful and proud of their child's signs of independence (i.e., feeding themselves, clothing themselves)
 - parents' pride turns into discomfort when the child begins to hold differing views from their parents
 - there are arguments between parent and child over who is "right" and what is "normal"
 - submissive child tends to become the "obedient/good child"
 - noncompliant child tends to become rebellious and is deemed the "disobedient/bad child"
 - goal in parenting is to nurture child(ren) to assume an Internal control position, thus assuming responsibility for choices and consequences
4. When adults remain mostly in the External Control position:
 - they feel "used" and angry, not in control of their own destiny
 - they feel responsible for other people's irresponsibility
 - blame others for what is "not right in my life", feel victimized
 - this perpetuates the dysfunctional environment where no one is in charge of themselves, but everyone feels obliged to control others.
5. Challenge: to recognize what is happening and move toward the more functional position of Internal Control, becoming your own "CEO".
 - set and maintain reasonable boundaries with self and others, thus assuming responsibility for your own destiny
 - allow others to influence your decisions, then choose the decision that makes the most sense to you, and live with the consequences of your decisions.

Conclusion

Rotter's concept of Locus of Control has been a useful concept for me personally and professionally. It has been the catalyst for many of my clients on their journey to having healthy relationships with themselves and the significant others in their lives. I offer my conceptualizations for your perusal and welcome your feedback. 🌳

References

Abramson, L.Y., Seligman, M.E.P. & Teasdale, J.D. (1978). Learned helplessness in humans: Critique and reformulation. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 87, 49-74

Duttweiler, P.C. (1984). The Internal Control Index: A Newly Developed Measure of Locus of Control. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 44, 209-221.

Ellis, A. (1994) Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy. New York: Birch Lane Press

Friedan, Betty (2000) Life So Far. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Levenson, H. (1973). Multidimensional locus of control in psychiatric patients. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 41, 397-404.

Rotter, J.B. (1966). Generalized experiences of internal versus external control of reinforcements. *Psychological Monographs*, 80 (whole no. 609).

Weiner, B. (1974). (Ed.). Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory. New Jersey: General Learning.

Gwen Scott RN, MC, RCC, is a clinical therapist who has a private practice in Ft. Langley and is also a staff therapist at CARES Counselling in Abbotsford, BC. She has recently retired from nursing, and now focuses on her counselling career which she finds facinating and rewarding. Gwen welcomes your feedback and can be reached at: gscott_mc@yahoo.com • 604-309-9349

State of the Art Distance Education



Stay at work while you upgrade!

Inter-Professional Courses:

- Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT)
- Emergency Mental Health
- Eating Disorders & Disordered Eating

Also available:
Mental Health Courses
for Nurses

Douglas College
Continuing Education
Health Sciences
Call 604-777-6527
1-866-930-5472

DouglasOnlineHealth.com

