Research Paper Education

Locus of Control and Performance: Widening Applicabilities

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to explain the evidence which indicates that internal perception of control is positively related to academic achievement, this paper suggests that mediating motivational and cognitive reactions, which differentiate internals from externals, may account for this relationship. Furthermore, on the basis of data which suggest that the perception of locus of control is a changeable disposition, this paper calls for structuring environments that will induce and maintain realistic internal perception of locus of control. A literature review on the relationship between locus of control (LOC) and academic achievement revealed that more internal beliefs are associated with greater academic achievement and that the magnitude of this relation is small to medium. Characteristics of the participants in the reviewed studies and the nature of the LOC and academic achievement measures were investigated as mediators of the relation. The relation tended to be stronger for adolescents than for adults or children. The relation was more substantial among males than among females. Stronger effects were associated with specific LOC measures and with standardized achievement or intelligence tests than with teacher grades.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

The concept of "locus of control" (LOC) is one of the most researched ideas in psychology. It refers to the notion that we each view life either as something we can control or something that controls us. We generally have either an internal locus (or place) of control or an external locus of control. It may also be possible that we operate with an internal locus of control in some areas of life, while operating from an external locus of control in other areas. Research suggests that people who operate with an internal locus of control are more successful in work and life-enjoying better health, relationships and personal and professional growth.

Locus of control (LOC) is a dimensional construct representing the degree to which individuals perceive reinforcing events in their lives to be the result of their own actions (an "internal" LOC) or fate (an "external" LOC; Bandura, 1986; Rotter, 1966). LOC is meaningfully related to several variables associated with academic achievement (Bernstein, Stephan, & Davis, 1979; Dollinger, 2000; Forsyth, 1986; Forsyth & McMillan, 1981; Kovenklioglu & Greenhaus, 1978; Noel, Forsyth, & Kelly, 1987; Perry & Penner, 1990). Specifically, high scoring students identify effort and ability as causes of their success, whereas those performing poorly are more likely to cite test difficulty and bad luck as causes (Bernstein et al., 1979; Kovenklioglu & Greenhaus, 1978). Internals appear to have more incidental knowledge of their environments and make better use of it (Lefcourt, 1976), which allows them to identify important cues and benefit from incidental learning situations (Dollinger & Taub, 1977; Wolk & DuCette, 1974). Thus, although other factors can mediate or qualify the impact of LOC, internal LOC generally predicts higher levels of academic success (Keith, Pottebaum, & Eberhardt, 1986).

Academic Performance

Unlike some other influences on student academic achievement (e.g., study skills), LOC reflects a student's implicit response to fundamental philosophical and scientific questions about the nature of human life and experiential reality. For this reason, LOC offers a bridge between academic and student development concerns. Although skeptical faculty may be reluctant to devote class time to or provide academic credit for development activities more ambiguously tied to curriculum (e.g., Myers-Briggs personality assessments), the question of causality is central to most disciplines. How students perceive the causes of events in their own lives may influence how they respond to the characters in Oedipus Rex or how readily they understand scientific determinism. LOC addresses fundamental questions germane to philosophy, mythology, and literature, as well as the behavioral, social, and physical sciences. Therefore, it has a natural place in the classroom. Making a connection between basic beliefs about causality and pragmatic, short-term objectives like helping students succeed academically and socially is a legitimate challenge for faculty and an added educational value already established empirically.

Dollinger (2000) and Noel et al. (1987) replicated the positive correlation between academic success and students' LOC found by previous researchers, and then constructed practical classroom interventions to help students learn. Dollinger had students complete an abbreviated LOC assessment, then quizzed them on course-relevant "trivia" such as their instructor's office location, exam schedule, and other facts not explicitly part of the instructional content but relevant to success. Final course grades were higher for internals. Internals also displayed higher scores on the trivia tests, suggesting greater attention to course relevant material and higher incidental learning as shown previously (Dollinger & Taub, 1977; Wolk & DuCette, 1974). Because the assessments were easily and naturally integrated into the course content (personality psychology), Dollinger also showed that trivia can be used to help students focus their attention on cues that foster success.

The value of LOC as an adjunct to instruction and a vehicle for promoting student success was further demonstrated in studies implementing an "internalizing" influence to improve failing externals' academic performance (Noel et al., 1987; Perry & Penner, 1990). Noel et al. selected students showing substandard performance on early exams in general psychology. Half were shown videotaped testimonials of a confederate who emphasized taking control of academic outcomes in order to succeed. Controls watched a video whose model attributed success to a more general adjustment to college without internalizing control. At the end of the term, those students influenced to adopt an internal LOC raised their mean grade to C or better, whereas the controls' average remained unsatisfactory (Noel et al., 1987).

Perry and Penner (1990) exposed internals and externals to a videotaped lecture in a simulated college classroom. Prior to

the lecture, some of the students were exposed to a videotaped LOC retraining session in which an instructor described the importance of effort and persistence in attaining academic success. Controls saw no video before proceeding to the simulated classroom. One week later, they all took a test on the lecture and on a home-work assignment. Attribution retraining improved external, but not internal, students' performance on both the test and the homework (Perry & Penner, 1990).

Internal vs. External Locus of Control

1. Persons with an internal locus of control (LOC) believe that they have more control of their lives—that what they do matters regarding safety, health, productivity and leadership (or any facet of work and life). In short, they have an attitude of "personal responsibility" for the outcomes of what they do. When accidents happen or mistakes are made, they are the first to look back and see what they could have done differently.
2. Persons with an external locus of control believe that events and circumstances control them, that what happens is a matter of fate no matter what they do. Such individuals often don't pay as close attention to procedures and safety protocols. Their attitude: "Hey, accidents happen."

Persons with an external locus of control are more likely to perceive themselves as "Victims"—to feel helpless and powerless—and to indulge in "victim mentality" or behavior (such as blaming and criticizing, complaining and fault-finding, "giving-up" or "checking-out"). Persons with an internal locus of control take responsibility for their lives and actions—they are more empowered and helpful, goal and service-oriented, and diligently work to bring about positive change—what we call Totally Responsible Persons®.

TRP® training helps us eliminate Victim Mentality and move toward becoming a Totally Responsible Person (TRP®)—a person who is grounded in a strong, internal LOC. Indeed, TRP training makes Victim Mentality so distasteful that those who identify it in themselves are motivated to change. Change is further inspired when we realize how personally empowering is an internal LOC versus an external one. There are many areas where the concept of "locus of control" applies to make for more effective leaders qualities, employees, and change agents. A few are:

Leadership

Leaders with an internal locus of control take responsibility for who they are, for their actions and performance, and for the performance of their department or organization. They see others as able to develop, and take an active role in the development of their team or department.

Education

It is clear those students who have a strong internal LOC have significantly greater academic success than those who don't. TRP® principles are used in schools to assist students in moving from an external LOC to an internal LOC. A quote from one study: "In an academic context, an external would likely consider failure on an exam to be the result of an unfair test (teacher's fault, for example). By itself, locus of control can have important implications. Gifford et al. (2006), for instance, found that college freshmen who were identified as internals obtained significantly higher GPAs, and Carden et al. (2004) found that internals showed significantly lower academic procrastination, debilitating test anxiety, and reported higher academic achievement than externals." TRP's TakeCharge™ Program for teens empowers students to become "internals."

Stress

Those with a more internal locus of control tend to be happier and experience less stress. They also enjoy better health (likely because they experience less of the damaging chronic stress that can come from feeling powerless), and are more satisfied with life in general. Perhaps, not surprisingly, those with an external locus of control are more susceptible to depression as well as other health problems, and tend to keep themselves in situations where they experience additional stress, feeling powerless to change their own circumstances—which adds even more stress to their lives. Indeed, this can become a vicious cycle.

Burnout

Burnout often relates to allowing oneself to become overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted in challenging situations, from work to parenting, care-giving to leading. Burnout has a detrimental impact on individuals, departments and sometimes whole organizations. TRP® provides an antidote to this disabling condition by helping us make more conscious choices, and regain control of our lives, as well as specific situations. By developing an internal Locus of Control, we can eliminate burnout and become more effective over the long haul.

Are achievement and motivation affected by LOC?

Research has shown that having an internal locus of control is related to higher academic achievement (Findley & Cooper, 1983). Internals earn somewhat better grades and work harder. This includes spending more time on homework as well as studying longer for tests. This makes sense because if you believe working hard will pay off, then you are likely to do so. What may cause someone to develop an external locus of control? According to Bender (1995), "Continued failure in spite of continued attempts at school tasks leads to an external locus of control. Further, a high external locus of control, in turn, leads to a lack of motivation for study and school in general." If someone has an external locus of control, he or she may feel that working hard is futile because their efforts have only brought disappointment. Ultimately, they may perceive failure as being their destiny. Have you ever had the experience that no matter how hard you tried you just couldn't get that A in a class? If this type of experience happened often, you would likely develop an external locus of control. Developing an external locus of control also makes it easier to excuse poor performance without hurting the individual's self-esteem (Basgall & Snyder, 1988). By attributing their failure to fate, chance, or to the fault of someone else, they are able to escape the potential damage that may come from attributing it to personal flaws or lack of ability. Can you remember a time when you received a poor grade on a test and your immediate reaction was "this test was impossible" or "the teacher didn't explain it well"? I know I have. This allows us to dismiss the belief that we are inadequate, keeping our self-esteem intact. However, if we consistently use this excuse, we may lose our motivation to improve.

Anderman and Midgley (1997) noted that "students who believe that their poor performance is caused by factors out of their control are unlikely to see any reason to hope for improvement. In contrast, if students attribute their poor performance to a lack of important skills or to poor study habits, they are more likely to persist in the future." In other words, students with an external locus of control are more likely to respond to failure by giving up hope and not trying harder, whereas those with an internal locus of control are likely to respond to failure by trying harder to improve. In the introductory example, John would be more likely than Katie to study harder for the next test and do better. Katie doesn't see any reason to try harder because her poor performance was due to something out of her control. If students are taught to have a more hopeful attitude (develop an internal locus of control), their grades tend to rise (Noel, Forsyth, & Kelley, 1987).

Conclusion

Locus of control focuses on ability to cope with uncertainty. While the individuals who have less tolerance resist to the change, the ones with high tolerance can adapt to the change more easily. Therefore, locus of control tries to identify the reaction given to change according to its status. If an individual can make self-control and has the belief that he/she is the dominant of his/her fate, he/she can give positive reactions

to the change. 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

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