



Who Controls My Life: Ethnicity Differences in Perceived Locus of Control



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Background

Internal-external expectancy for control of reinforcement (LOC) is a psychological construct describing the degree to which a person perceives reinforcement as influenced by his or her own behaviors. Internal LOC refers to the perception that reinforcement is generally contingent upon one's own behavior, whereas external LOC is the perception that powerful others, chance, and fate determine reward outcomes. Rotter conceived of locus of control as a single dimension in which an individual could be located between the internal and external poles. Many researchers have since proposed that the concept of locus of control should be considered as a multidimensional construct.

A multidimensional scale developed by Levenson (1973), was based on the social learning perspective proposed by Rotter (1966), which measured locus of control as a generalized expectancy to perceived reinforcement. Levenson's concept of internality is the same as that offered by Rotter, but the external dimension has been extended to include two types of external orientations: (a) belief in control by powerful others and (b) belief in chance or fate controlling reinforcement. Individuals who perceived their lives as controlled by powerful others were found to be cognitively and behaviorally different from those who perceived fate or chance to be controlling their lives (Levenson & Miller, 1976).

Studies have shown that when valued outcomes are received independently of behavioral performance, people shift toward external LOC. Conversely, when responses are instrumental in determining reinforcement, LOC shifts toward an internal orientation. Crisis situations outside of personal control have also been associated with increases in externality, and psychotherapy in which clients are encouraged to adopt behaviors allowing greater control over life crisis situations has been shown to cause a shift from external to internal orientation.

We hypothesized that locus of control differs by ethnicity and may affect perceptions of and outlook on aging.

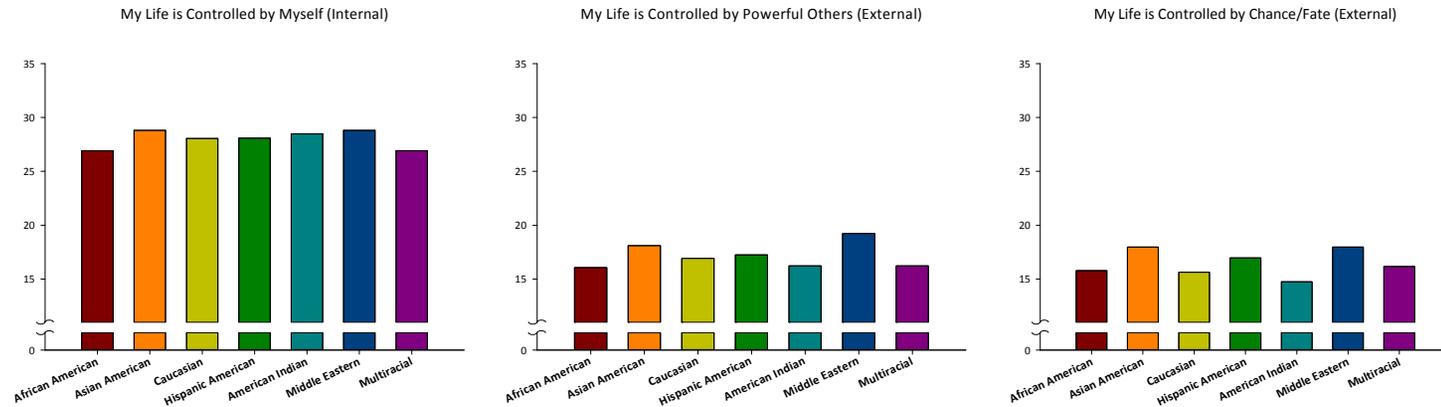
Goals and Predictions

We hypothesized that locus of control differs by ethnicity and may affect perceptions of and outlook on aging. We believe that a higher perception of internal control may be related to a more positive view of aging in different ethnicities.

Materials and Methods

The Multidimensional Locus of Control Scale (MLC) was administered to measure the participants' perception on Locus of Control. There were 24 questions and each question employed a 6-point Likert scale of agreement (ranging from -3 to +3, midpoint 0). The questions were divided in to three categories: Personal control (Internal Scale), Powerful Others (External Scale), and chance or fate (External Scale).

The MLC scale was presented to 1461 participants ranging in age from 18 to 94 ($M=37.58$; $SD=17.2$), 63% female, 37% male. The average education level of the participants were some college (just over 1 year) and had an average standard of living (2.9, based on a 5 pt scale with 1 = well above and 5 = well below). Data on ethnic group membership were self-reported. These data are part of a larger study examining influences on attitudes towards aging.



Results and Discussion

A One Way ANOVA on Internal Control indicates that ethnicity does affect how one perceives the impact of their own actions on their lives, $F(7,1186) = 3.08, p = .003$. This effect is likely driven by lower perceived influence by African Americans and Multiracials. We also found differences in perceived external control from powerful others, with Middle Easterners and Asian Americans perceiving greater influence than any other ethnicity, $F(7,1163) = 2.57, p < .01$. Finally, there were differences in perceived control by external chance forces, $F(7, 1154) = 3.40, p = .001$. Once again, Middle Easterners and Asian Americans perceive more control from external chance events than any other ethnicities.

Ethnicity differences were shown in all three measures of control, with Middle Easterners near the top of every category. We show that perceptions of locus of control differ across ethnicities in very important ways, with Middle Easterners perceiving far greater control from powerful others than any other ethnicity. These data suggest that Middle Easterners are able to acknowledge the influence of external forces while still maintaining a high level of internal control.

We are currently pairing these LOC data with other data on knowledge of aging and attitudes towards aging to develop a comprehensive model of how individuals form attitudes towards aging and aged individuals. Preliminary analyses are suggesting of a complicated relationship between education, experience with aging, locus of control, and overall knowledge of aging. It also appears as though one's ethnicity, age, and gender will affect one's own attitude toward aging. With older adults growing to represent a significantly large proportion of our society, it is critical that we understand how and why people form their opinions of the aging process.

Ethnicity	N	%
African American	299	20
Asian American	191	13
Caucasian	603	41
Hispanic	126	9
Native American	34	2
Middle Eastern	58	4
Multiracial	61	4

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