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Mind

Who steers your life? Locus of control according to Julian Rotter

The difference between internal and external control, what studies have found and why the extremes do not help

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Two students get a bad mark in the same exam. One thinks: "I didn't study enough." The other thinks: "The professor has it in for me" or "I was unlucky with the questions." Both may be partly right. But how they explain it affects what they will do next time.

Rotter's idea

In 1966 the American psychologist Julian Rotter proposed the concept of **locus of control**. People with an internal locus of control tend to believe that the outcomes in their life depend mainly on their own actions and efforts. People with an external locus of control tend to believe they depend mainly on luck, chance or other, more powerful people. Rotter measured this with a questionnaire that came into wide use.

The concept resembles explanatory style, which we have written about in another article, but it is more general: it concerns not only how we explain failures but our overall belief in how much we can influence our life.

What studies have found

Many studies have linked an internal locus of control with more effort to learn, more care for health and greater job satisfaction. This makes sense: if you believe your actions matter, you have more reason to act. But these are mainly associations, and the direction of cause may run both ways: people who have had more opportunity and success in life may have learned to believe more in their own control.

> *We do not control everything. But we almost always control something. That something is where change begins.*

The extremes do not help

An excessive internal locus of control can make us blame ourselves for things that do not depend on us, such as an illness, an economic crisis or injustice. An excessive external locus can make us give up before trying. The healthy balance resembles what Epictetus called the distinction between what is up to us and what is not.

How Rotter measured it

Rotter's questionnaire consisted of 29 pairs of statements, and for each pair the participant had to choose the one that seemed more true. For example, one statement might say that many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck, while the other said that people's misfortunes result from the mistakes they make themselves. The more choices of the second kind, the more internal the locus of control was considered to be. Rotter stressed that this was not a typology with two categories, but a continuum on which most people are somewhere in the middle.

Plants in the nursing home

In 1976 Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin carried out an experiment in a nursing home in Connecticut. The residents of one floor were encouraged to make decisions about their daily lives, and each received a plant to look after themselves. The residents of another floor received a message stressing that the staff would take care of them, and their plants were looked after by the staff. After three weeks, the first group was more active and reported greater well-being. In a follow-up after 18 months, Rodin and Langer reported fewer deaths in the first group, but the numbers were small and this finding should be treated with caution.

Learned helplessness

Martin Seligman and Steven Maier showed in 1967 that dogs which had received electric shocks they could not escape later made no attempt to flee even when escape was easy. They called this **learned helplessness**. Fifty years later, in 2016, the same authors revised the theory in the light of neuroscience. They concluded that passivity is the brain's default reaction to prolonged danger, and that what is actually learned is **control** : when we discover that our actions have an effect, the brain holds back this passivity and we start to act again.

Children and later health

Catharine Gale, David Batty and Ian Deary used data from a British study that followed thousands of children born in 1970. When these children were ten years old, their locus of control was measured. At the age of 30, those who as children had had a more internal locus of control were less likely to be obese, to have high blood pressure or to feel a lot of stress, and they rated their own health as better. The link weakened, but did not disappear, when family education and income were taken into account in the analysis.

An ancient idea

The distinction between what depends on us and what does not is not a modern discovery. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who was born a slave and lived in the first and second centuries AD, opens his *Handbook* with exactly this division. According to him, our judgements, desires and actions depend on us, while our body, property, reputation and position in society do not fully depend on us. For Epictetus, much suffering comes when we try to control what does not depend on us and neglect what does.

How to find the balance

1. **Before a problem, divide it into two lists:** what I can influence and what does not depend on me.
2. **Act on the first list,** even with a small step.
3. **Accept the second list** without denying it and without blaming yourself for it.
4. **Notice the words "always" and "never"** when you talk about your fate. They often signal a generalisation.

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