

TUTORIAL
4.14

Control: Who is in charge?

This tutorial introduces another fundamental area of culture: the *locus of control* - which is the extent to which individuals believe that they can control the events that affect them. We will define and explore the two poles of this dimension; *activism* and *fatalism*.

Introduction

Which of the following two statements do you most agree with?

- A. What happens to me is my own doing.
- B. Sometimes I feel I don't have control over the direction my life is taking.

When asked the same question, the percentage of Americans who chose A was 89%, but the percentage of Chinese who chose A was only 35%.

Why is there such a great difference between the American and Chinese percentages? There could be many explanations, but one almost certainly is the fact that many Americans believe in the power of the individual to prevail against all obstacles, that there is nothing people cannot do, or become, if they want it badly enough and are willing to make the effort: "Where there is a will there is a way." Conversely, if people are not doing well, Americans tend to think it is the individual who is to blame. The American view is *activism*, the view that the locus of control is *internal*.

In Chinese culture, many people believe that while you can shape your life to some extent, certain external forces, things beyond your control, also play an important part. They say that what happens to you in life is not entirely in your hands. The Chinese view is *fatalism*, the view that the locus of control is *external*.

Locus of control - internal or external

Cultures differ greatly in their view of a person's place in the external world, especially the degree to which human beings can control or manipulate forces outside themselves and shape their own destiny. The two sides of this dimension, internal and external control, are described below:

Internal (activism) -

The locus of control is largely internal, within the individual. There are very few givens in life, few circumstances that have to be accepted as they are, that cannot be changed. There are no limits on what I can do or become, so long as I set my mind to it and make the necessary effort. Life is what I *do*.

The following sets of statements are characteristic of a view that the locus of control is internal:

- The laws of the universe can be discovered.
- Progress is inevitable, as people figure out more and more about the world.
- Every problem has a solution. If the world is a mechanism, then it's possible to know how it works; no problem should be unsolvable if you look hard enough.
- Optimism is the rule because humans are in control.
- Where there's a will there's a way.
- People believe strongly in technology. Mechanisms (technology) are a hallmark of internally controlled thinking.
- Unhappiness is your own fault.
- You make your own luck.

External (fatalism) -

The locus of control is largely external to the individual. Some aspects of life are predetermined, built into the nature of things. There are limits beyond which we cannot go and certain givens that cannot be changed and must be accepted. Life is largely what *happens* to me.

The following sets of statements are characteristic of a view that the locus of control is external:

- Stoicism is the rule.
- Some things are a matter of luck or chance.
- Progress is not automatic because anything can happen.
- The workings of the universe are ultimately unknowable.
- Nature cannot be dominated by man.
- Some problems do not have solutions - not everything is knowable.
- Where there's a will there's a will - you can't necessarily make things happen.
- Unhappiness is a natural part of life and you can't always be happy because that would mean you were in control.

What about you? Internal and external control

Below are a number of paired statements (a and b). Immediately after reading each pair, write down the letter of the one of the two that best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic. Then see whether you came out more on the internal or external control side.

1a. If I'm unhappy, I should do something about it.

1b. Nothing's broken if I'm unhappy; it's just part of life's ups and downs.

2a. The external world is a mechanism like other mechanisms; its workings can be discovered, predicted, even manipulated.

2b. The external world is complex, dynamic and organic. It cannot ultimately be known.

3a. It is important to have a positive attitude about life.

3b. You should see life as it really is.

4a. If I try hard enough and want something bad enough, nothing can stop me from getting what I want.

4b. Some things are beyond my reach, no matter what I do.

5a. What is new is usually better.

5b. What is new is suspect.

6a. I make my own luck.

6b. Many things happen because of chance or luck.

7a. Every problem has a solution, if you look hard enough.

7b. Some problems don't have a solution.

8a. I tend to be proactive and a doer.

8b. I tend to be stoic.

9a. If a friend is depressed, I would try to cheer him/her up.

9b. If a friend is depressed, there is no need for me to do anything.

The "a" statements tend to be more characteristic of internally controlled people. The "b" statements tend to be more characteristic of externally controlled people.

Australia - a fatalist nation?

Thomas Hartmann, in his blog 'Four Cultures' wrote the following piece about Australian culture. He explores the idea that fatalism is active, not passive. If you come from a different culture, think about how the idea of the locus of control exhibits itself in your home culture.

Fatal Nation

The prime example of a society dominated by a fatalist activism is Australia. I'm hardly the first to notice this. The Fatal Shore (Hughes 1987) and The Lucky Country (Horne 1964) are two epithets that have stuck. Its modern foundation as an archipelago of repressive penal colonies, its history of near genocidal oppression of the indigenous population, together with its genuinely unpredictable climate (dominated by El Nino Southern Oscillation) make this a continent uniquely conditioned by and for fatalism. Australia has 1 gaming machine for every 99 people (contrasting with the UK at one per 236 people or the US at one per 426, according to the 2004 World Count of Gaming Machines). These produce significant revenue for the government, particularly in NSW, strongly impacting on policy. Policing is controlled by fatalism. A widespread Government advert says 'More police: more chance of getting caught'. Every social event includes a raffle; even the recent Monet exhibition at the Gallery of NSW ended with online competition entry to win a trip to Giverny. These are all examples of contrived randomness hard at work every day. To sum up: at least one country is in constant danger of suffering a monoculture of fatalism. Meanwhile, cultural theorists themselves conspire to create a limited culture that mistakenly regards fatalism as inactive, and therefore irrelevant.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. One of the most common complaints of people from Western cultures working around the world is how long it takes to "get things done" in their host country. Sometimes the complaint appears in comments about the slow pace of life overseas. This Western urge to 'do something', is sometimes inconsistent with one of the goals of cross-cultural work which is to encourage other people to get involved. How do you think you'll be able to deal with this situation, to reconcile the activist side of your character (if you are an activist)? Will you have to redefine your idea of accomplishment or of success?

2. How do you think cultural conditioning concerning the locus of control effects the ability of believers from different cultures to trust in God to meet their needs?
3. Do you think a person's view of the locus of control is a spiritual concept or a cultural concept, or both?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Try to find a friend from a different culture who is willing to take the self-test (the numbered statements in the tutorial) on internal or external control. Explain to them that you are learning about cultural differences. Read each pair of statements to them and have them pick the one that they agree with. Make a report on your findings, specifically any differences you see between their view and your view.
2. Write a short response to Thomas Hartmann's blog piece on Australia as a fatalist nation. If you are from another culture, write some notes about how the view of the locus of control exhibits itself in your culture.