

Evidence of the Moderating Effect of Locus of Control on Ethical Decision Making: How Can Improvement Occur?

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ABSTRACT

The personality variable, Locus of Control (LOC), has been shown generally to have a moderating effect on the ethical decision making of university students. While there is some diversity in the results reported in the literature, much of the research reports a significant difference in the ethical responses of the students. When differences are reported, Internals supply the more ethical responses.

Rotter's (1966) LOC instrument, which is often used to study the link between LOC and other variables, is designed to assess how much control an individual believes he/she has over the outcomes of life. An *Internal* person believes in a causal link between his/her decisions or actions and the expected consequences. Internals believe that the consequences are directly linked to the decisions they make and the actions they take. They tend to take responsibility for what happens because they believe their efforts/actions are directly related to those decisions. *Externals* believe that the expected outcomes or consequences in their lives are under the control of luck, fate, or powerful others. Therefore, there is less of a need to accept responsibility for what happens to them because they do not believe in a cause-and-effect relationship between the precedent behavior and the subsequent outcome.

The examination of the link between ethical decision making and LOC using university students in the US has generally supported the internal/external LOC distinction. Most of the research indicates support for the belief that internals will supply the more ethical responses to the surveys and scenarios considered (Hagerty and Sims, 1978; Brownell, 1981; Jones and Kavanaugh, 1996; McCuddy and Peery, 1996; Terpstra et al., 1991; Ameen et al., 1996; Trevino and Youngblood, 1990; Smith et al., 1998/99). Other studies have found only limited support for the LOC variable effect in ethical research using university students (Hegerty and Sims, 1979; Rogers and Smith, 2001). Research has also been reported that indicates no ethical response differences on the LOC variable (Brownell, 1982; Geurin and Kohut, 1989; Bass et al., 1999; Jones and Kavanaugh, 1996)

More recently, there have been studies examining the LOC link in the international academic domain. When a country variable is used in the ethical decision making studies, research comparing North American students to those from Western European countries or Australia generally have indicated no significant differences in the ethical responses of the students (Eynon et al., 1996; Stevenson & Bodkin, 1998; Whipple & Swords, 1992; Lysonski & Gaidia, 1991). Other studies have compared the responses from Anglo-heritage countries with various Asian subgroups. In general, the differences in the responses between/among university subjects from geographically and culturally diverse areas indicate significant differences (Armstrong, 1996; Brody et al., 1998; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1999; Nyaw & Ng, 1994; White & Rhodeback, 1992).

Research examining LOC and academic success has reported Internals generally have greater academic achievement (Findley and Cooper, 1983). The results indicate Internals earn somewhat better grades and tend to work harder in school (i.e., more time on homework and studying for tests). This corresponds to the cause-and-effect belief associated with actions and outcomes. These results link to other research done with university students. One study reported first-year students who entered with lower LOC scores (Internals) reported significantly higher grade point averages (GPAs) than Externals (Gifford et al., 2006).

Smith et al. (2007) examined the global nature of LOC when surveying ethical decision making of university students from eight globally diverse countries. The research reported highly significant differences in the responses on the ethical decisions of the students based on the internal/external LOC designation. Those students designated as Internal supplied significantly more ethical responses, as compared to those designated as External.

The general results of the previously mentioned research lends a considerable amount of evidence for the greater ethicality and academic success of those students designated as Internal, regardless of the country in which the student subject is located. These results present a challenge to the academic community. If greater Internal LOC belief translates into greater academic success and better decision making, then what can the academic community do to help?

The literature presents suggestions related to research conducted and attribution theory. Parks et al. (1975) conducted a study that attempted to eliminate self-defeating behaviors. The results of the study indicated a significant move toward more internal LOC for the treatment group. In another study, Eisenman (1997) reported an increased internal LOC by telling the internal treatment subjects that the outcomes in a verbal conditioning task were directly linked to their performance. In addition, the external treatment subjects increased their external LOC scores when they were told that they had no control over their outcomes. Similar gains in internal LOC scores were indicated when twelfth grade students offered modeling experiences to eighth grade students. The modeling experiences included study skills, decision making, small-group discussions concerning life decisions, and vocational-educational aspirations (Matheny et al., 1978). In addition, attribution training is usually helpful in increasing internal LOC. Activities, such as positive statements to oneself, is fairly easy to implement, can have a positive impact, and requires no additional costs (Grantz, 2007).