

Taking responsibility: Locus of control

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I ran across an interesting piece of research while writing another paper. A study that started in 1968 and ran until about 2002 supports that college students have more of an external locus of control than internal locus of control as time goes on. (Twenge et al., 2004) If you haven't heard of the term locus of control, I'm not surprised: It is a jargon term used in social science research. Responsibility is the basic idea behind locus of control. If you are responsible it is internal locus of control. (Spector, 2002) If something or someone else is responsible, it is external locus of control. How you perceive control is the crucial factor of the idea behind responsibility.

Why is this study so fascinating? Internal locus of control is tied to having leadership skills that are well developed, better coping skills (for stress) and lower risk behavior. (Periasamy & Ashby, 2002; Storms & Spector, 1987) External locus of control is the opposite side of the coin. Most academic teach locus of control in a good vs. evil king of way. (Internal = good/ External = evil) When I read the findings of the study I realized that we, as a society, were turning into the kind of people that would blame it on the other guy. The excuse, "My dog ate my homework" was becoming a popular way of getting out of responsibilities.

I'm not sure if this can be attributed to a lack of standards or just a rise in apathy. I do know that this behavior is being accepted by parents, teachers, guardians and anyone else that has contact with human beings ages 0-23. As clueless as I am to the causes of this lack of personal responsibility in college students, I do see this as being a problem in the next few years. That is if it is not already happening. It is an easy jump from high external locus of control to lack of empathy or lower moral standards. Blame it on the dog, right?

Let's have an example. Shall we? Say preying on those that cannot provide enough to keep the wolf from the door? In the last few years people were giving rewards for nothing and asking for more back in return. This is normal for a loan, but soon populations were targeted that could not pay back the loans. (Predatory lending) I've heard the excuses from these loan officers. Most of their actions are rationalized with the statement, "the company told me to". Besides, it is not as if it is your problem, you just make the deal. You don't put a gun to the customer's head. Not to sound like your mother, but if someone told you to jump off a bridge... would you jump?

Internal locus of control is not always possible and I acknowledge that fact. Fire storms, floods and earthquakes are all proof that some things are simply out of our span of control. I do expect that you will make the best of a bad situation. Getting a job is a good example of trying to take responsibility for you. Despite the unemployment rate people are still searching for a way to keep themselves, not just out of debt, but in control of their own situations. Internal locus of control is an action-oriented state of mind. If we are no longer ready to take action where does that leave us? I see a stadium full of people in their fully adjustable beds being served by machines while watching streaming video entertainment: Wall-e style. We're almost there folks!

References

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