

# Internal and External Locus of Control

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss another worldview position that can differ depending on the culture. The areas of focus include:

1. Internal Locus of Control
2. External Locus of Control
3. Locus of Control in Conflict

## 1. Internal Locus of Control

Different cultures have different views on how much control we actually have over the events and circumstances in our lives.

Take a moment to read the last two lines from "Invictus":

*"I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul."*

William Ernest Henley was the poet who wrote that, and it's quoted because it reflects so well the spirit here in the United States. One of being the captain of our own soul, shaping our own destiny.

Here in the United States, we have what's called an **internal locus of control**, or non-fatalism. Our cultural worldview is that the individual controls action; we're the masters of our fate.

Of course this is not absolute; it doesn't apply to everybody. But in general, it describes an attitude here in the United States and is one way of answering the question of locus of control. When the control is internal, the individual has the power.

### IN CONTEXT

It can be interesting to think about how this sentiment is shared across cultures and backgrounds within the United States. From a young age, people are taught to make decisions to have positive effects on their futures. It shows up in pop culture with songs, television, and film referencing growth and achievement. The country is considered the land of opportunity. If things aren't working where you are or in what you're doing, you can make changes and shape your own destiny.

This free will is something that our courts respect, and it's written right into our constitution. We have big ideas, and, if we or our children suffer setbacks, we say to try again. There is a sense of optimism

and hope in our world view.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Internal Locus of Control

A cultural worldview where people believe that individuals mostly control circumstance; also known as non-fatalism.

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## 2. External Locus of Control

The opposite of the internal locus of control is the **external locus of control**, or fatalism. This is a point of view that sees forces outside the individual. These forces could any number of things, such as social factors, the government, plain luck, or maybe God or heavenly forces.

Regardless of what the specific forces are, they have the power, and the individual does not. In other words, this view sees fate as ultimately being in control.

The question of whether circumstances are controlled by an individual or by fate is a question that most, if not all, human beings ask and perhaps answer individually.

Even though cultures themselves have taken worldview positions on this, a culture's position is not absolute for every person in that culture. People differ within cultures in terms of how they will answer that question.

But within a culture that does look at fate as being in control, the individuals who prescribe to this view would feel like they don't have as much of a chance to shape their destiny because it's not up to them.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** If someone faces a setback, the person probably feels that it was destined. Struggles are seen as inevitable or unavoidable because of that sense of fatalism.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### External Locus of Control

A cultural worldview where people believe events are mostly controlled by forces outside the individual; also known as fatalism.

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## 3. Locus of Control in Conflict

When there's a conflict between people who hold opposing worldview positions about who or what is in control, there may be miscommunication and difficulties that result from this.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Say you are doing a work project, and you want to make some improvements to the process. You're expecting some action or some accountability to change things; however, you find that you're working with someone who has worked in this particular situation for quite some time and feels that this is just the way it is.

Coming from the non-fatalist point of view, you may perceive this person as lazy or irresponsible; you don't understand why they are not being assertive and taking control. But this is an internalized perspective

about one's role in the world and one's ability to make even a small change.

The person who is coming from this other point of view may look at you trying to take all this action and think that you have inflated expectations. They think that perhaps you don't have respect for the way things are, the natural order of things. These two opposing points of view could also play out in a family or home-life situation in which people accept their roles as part of their destinies.

In the conflict resolution process, these views can also influence a person's conflict style or approach to solving a conflict. This is because the actions that a person feels empowered to take will be different depending on what point of view they are coming from.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Does the person feel comfortable and confident in their ability to be assertive and approach someone? What if it's someone of a different status level? Would that be a very uncomfortable thing to do? Would they feel that this is destiny in terms of the way things already are?



#### BIG IDEA

The ability to take action toward making change, or questioning situations, will be different for parties coming from these contrasting worldviews of fatalism and non-fatalism. Worldview positions on taking action to control events in life differs between cultures. These positions don't apply to everyone within a culture, but they can be helpful to understanding certain conflicts.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that in general, cultures have one of two different worldviews on control: the **internal locus of control**, meaning that the individual has the power to take action and make changes in any given circumstance, or the **external locus of control**, meaning that circumstances are in the hands of fate. You now understand that the **locus of control can have a role in conflict**. Even though not everyone within a culture will have the same view, understanding these differences can help get to the root of a conflict that may be based on these two opposing worldviews. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### External Locus of Control

A cultural worldview where people believe events are mostly controlled by forces outside the individual; also known as fatalism.

##### Internal Locus of Control

A cultural worldview where people believe that individuals mostly control circumstance; also known as non-fatalism.