

Personal Control Beliefs

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Personal control refers to the degree to which an individual believes one is in control of his or her own life, as opposed to one's circumstances being the result of factors outside of one's control. An individual with high personal control has a stronger belief that he or she is able to produce desired outcomes within a designated domain. The beliefs themselves are broken down into two main constructs: external and internal control. Internal control emphasizes the responsibility of the individual and his or her actions on the outcome, while external control determines the outcome as being guided by an outside source or power, independent of personal choices and behavior. Whether or not individuals hold themselves and their behavior accountable for an outcome often determines whether or not the outcome is perceived to be positive or negative. Individuals higher in internal control tend to be more adaptive, more likely to take responsibility for areas of importance such as health and performance, and engage in behaviors targeted toward achieving goals.

The earliest work on control beliefs grew from the question of how past events could impact future behavior, ultimately providing an answer by operating as a link between past and future. Subsequent research has understandably evolved to encompass important psychological concepts such as self-efficacy, causal attributions, and locus of control. Thus, the importance of control beliefs has been prominently featured in the research findings surrounding social

cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), goal theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), and expectancy value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992).

Further, control orientations themselves have been found to vary over both situations and time, and can be different depending on the domain. To this end, Carlisle-Frank (1991) outlined four specific domains of personal control that are considered to be critical for life: (1) control over institutional factors; (2) control over personal achievement/goal attainment; (3) control over interpersonal relationships; and (4) control over personal health habits.

From a developmental perspective, perceptions of personal control are strongly correlated with adaptation and successful development and aging. Compared to those lower in personal control, individuals high in personal control tend to engage in health-promoting behaviors, are more successful at coping with stress both psychologically and physiologically, better regulate their negative emotions, are better equipped with strategies to utilize when faced with obstacles, report fewer health problems, and show greater longevity. Similarly, within academic settings, personal control beliefs are associated with motivation, self-regulation, academic achievement, effort in academic settings, and overall persistence in regard to academic efforts.

This ability to perceive that one is in control when presented with challenges also allows for greater outcomes that extend into the later stages of life, when control is desperately needed to in order to direct actions and effort aimed at preserving physical and cognitive functioning, as well as overall well-being. As people age, internal control beliefs typically tend to decrease while external control beliefs increase. Already a vulnerable population, this shift in personal control beliefs happens as the risk for cognitive impairment is simultaneously rising. Importantly, personal control beliefs potentially serve an important purpose of augmenting a sense of hopefulness necessary for adaptation tactics for health, delaying functional deterioration, and

enhancing self-protective interpretive processes that can help ease declines associated with primary and secondary aging. Despite facing declines, those with high personal control tend to take advantage of what goals they can set and accomplish, albeit more limited, and actively prioritize and shift their focus onto what is important. This process is central to the “selective optimization with compensation” model of successful aging advanced by Paul Baltes.

It is important to note that no solitary emphasis on either internal control or external control is uniformly beneficial or uniformly negative. Rather, research has shown that in cases where individuals must cope with extreme circumstances and life events outside of their control, higher external control in the form of a belief in fate or an outside power over internal control may be more beneficial.

Further Reading

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