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Personal Control



Individual Differences in Personal Control

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Synonyms

[Perceived control](#); [Sense of control](#)

Definition

Personal control refers to “the perceived ability to significantly alter events” (Burger 1989). A high personal control corresponds to a belief that one can change the course of events, whereas a low personal control represents the lack of such belief.

Introduction

Possessing a sense of personal control has been argued to be one of the most fundamental motivations. Because, it is adaptive from an evolutionary perspective as lacking personal control over the course of events would make it harder to survive and reproduce. Individuals vary in their sense of personal control and some have higher perceived control than the others.

There are different conceptualizations of personal control. One of them is *self-efficacy* (Bandura 1994). A high level of self-efficacy would mean that the person strongly believes that he/she is capable of achieving a goal. Another concept is *locus of control* (Rotter 1966). An *internal locus of control* represents a belief that one is in charge of the course of events in life, whereas an *external locus of control* is characterized as a belief that the events are largely influenced by external entities, like other people, chance, or fate. People also differ in their desire for obtaining personal control. People with high *desirability of control* (Burger and Cooper 1979) have a strong desire to possess control. It is different than perceived control as someone might have a desire for control even when he/she has a low level of perceived control at the time. Individuals have trait-level differences in their self-efficacy, locus of control, and desirability of control. Furthermore, recent research suggests that an individual can experience fluctuations in his/her sense of control, and the locus of control can be altered by the stressful experiences during the day (Ryon and Gleason 2014).

Sociodemographic Correlates of Personal Control

Certain demographic differences predict the level of personal control. Males and highly educated people were found to have more perceived control (Mirowsky and Ross 2007). Although there are mixed findings regarding the age differences, it has been generally accepted that perceived control peaks at middle age and starts to decrease at older ages (Mirowsky and Ross 2007). Cultural differences are also important. Individualistic cultures place a strong emphasis on having a personal control in life, whereas collectivistic ones emphasize maintaining harmony and fitting in with the world (Markus and Kitayama 1991). So, personal control is relatively more desired and beneficial for people from individualistic cultures.

Effects of Personal Control

Having a sense of personal control in life has important effects. Decades ago, Seligman and his colleagues showed that lack of control over the aversive stimuli leads to *learned helplessness* which make people feel like escaping the negative stimuli is impossible (e.g., Hiroto and Seligman 1975). Several studies demonstrated that learned helplessness was associated with depressive symptoms. More recent research had similar findings: Low level of control undermines psychological well-being, and it is associated with high levels of depression, stress, and anxiety (Infurna et al. 2013). Lack of control also deteriorates physical health: People without sense of control are more likely to experience worsening of physical functioning, suffer from cardiovascular diseases, and have a lower life expectancy (Infurna et al. 2013). As the perception is crucial for the sense of control, both real and *illusory* control has similar effects (e.g., Alloy and Clements 1992). Thus, regardless of the objective level of it, perception of not having personal control has negative consequences.

Compensating for the Lack of Personal Control

What happens when an individual lacks a sense of personal control? Is there any alternative way that people can buffer the negative effects of not having a personal control? Rothbaum et al. (1982) name personal control as *primary control*. When primary control is lacking, they argue, people resort to *secondary control* by adjusting themselves to the world and accepting the way it is. Similarly, according to *compensatory control model* (Kay et al. 2009), the fundamental motivation is not to obtain personal control but to achieve order and structure. When individuals cannot rely on their personal control, they compensate for it by enhancing their beliefs in external control which can also achieve order (e.g., a controlling god, government, etc.).

Conclusion

To conclude, individuals differ in their sense of personal control. Certain sociodemographic variables including gender, age, education level, and cultural background affect how much one feels in control. Such difference in perceived control might have important effects on both physical and psychological well-being. But personal control is not equally important for everyone, as it is particularly crucial for people from more individualistic cultures. Lastly, when the sense of personal control is lacking, people can compensate for it by either resorting to secondary control strategies or bolster their belief in external control.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Agency](#)
- ▶ [General Efficacy Scale](#)
- ▶ [Individualism-Collectivism](#)
- ▶ [Internal-External Locus of Control Scale](#)
- ▶ [Measurement of General Self-Efficacy](#)
- ▶ [Locus of Control](#)
- ▶ [Personal Agency](#)

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