

# LOCUS OF CONTROL WITHIN SUBGROUPS IN A CORRECTIONAL POPULATION

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The present study was designed to investigate locus of control (I-E) among various subgroups in a correctional population. Using a procedure designed to minimize demands for socially desirable responses, 45 adult male prisoners were tested individually. Consistent with earlier research, white inmates and those active in social organizations scored more internally than others. However, in contrast with the available literature, drug users were found to be significantly more external ( $F = 9.13$ ,  $df = 1, 41$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The drug use results were interpreted in terms of the presence or absence of demands for socially appropriate test responses.

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**A** correctional system is generally viewed as serving various functions including the protection of society, punishment of the criminal, and, ideally, rehabilitation of the offender. However, most observers would agree that the degree to which the goal of rehabilitation is achieved is largely dependent upon the extent to which the inmate takes advantage of the services and programs available in the institution. The degree to which individuals believe that they can change and control their own lives may be one factor influencing inmate participation in

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institutional programs. Rotter's (1966) Internal-External locus of control (I-E) scale is designed to measure how much a person feels that his own actions determine what happens to him (internal control) and to what degree he views outside forces, such as fate or luck, as controlling his life (external control). Therefore, the I-E scale may predict involvement in a variety of programs.

Prison inmates have been studied and found to differ little in locus of control from noninstitutionalized populations (Ladwig, 1963; Lefcourt and Ladwig, 1965). This reported similarity of inmates' I-E scores to the larger population is rather surprising, since inmates live in an environment where they have little actual personal control over their lives. One possible explanation is that the results of earlier studies reflect the effects of demand characteristics and social desirability. Previous studies have typically administered the I-E scale as part of an initial group testing battery (Calicchia, 1974) or during a somewhat ambiguous experimental session (Lefcourt and Ladwig, 1965). It may well be that inmates suspected that the I-E scale was going to become part of their institutional record, and essentially "faked good" resulting in lower scores (Rotter, 1966, 1975). This reasoning is supported by the significant correlation found by Ladwig (1963) between I-E and social desirability. It is suggested that if the I-E scale is administered in a manner that minimizes the influence of social desirability, inmates may score more externally than the general population.

Previous research is quite consistent in indicating that blacks tend to score more externally than whites (Battle and Rotter, 1963; Lefcourt and Ladwig, 1965) and that individuals active in social organizations score more internally (Brown and Strickland, 1972; Strickland, 1965). On the basis of both Rotter's (1966) theoretical analysis and the available research, it is predicted that white inmates and inmates involved in inmate organizations will be more internally oriented than other inmates.

It is expected that the relationship between locus of control and therapy participation is more complex. Rotter (1966)

suggested that maladjusted individuals as a group would score more externally with greater variability, and there is some research data in support of this (Calhoun, Cheney, and Dawes, 1974; Strassberg and Robinson, 1974). However, several factors in addition to an inmate's self-perceived maladjustment might influence entering therapy in prison. One that is commonly attributed to inmates is a desire to manipulate the parole board and staff to create a good impression. If the desire to create a positive image is operating as a motivation for therapy, inmates in treatment would be expected to score more internally than other inmates. Due to the conflicting predictions possible, this study will not make a directional hypothesis concerning the relationship between therapy involvement and locus of control.

The literature examining the relationship between locus of control and drug use presents a somewhat contradictory situation. On the basis of the I-E scale's theoretical foundation, one would expect drug users to be quite external. Drug use involves employing an external agent to provide a subjective state of well-being. However, the experimental research is fairly consistent in demonstrating the opposite trend—drug abusers in general score more internally than comparison groups (Jones, 1973). While there have been attempts to explain the apparent contradiction in terms of the drug's effects (Calicchia, 1974), it may be more appropriate to examine the role of demand characteristics. Much of the previous research has not attempted to control the influence of social desirability during testing, and has often employed questionable control groups. Therefore, it would seem unwise to accept the results without question. Due to the conflicting nature of the theoretical prediction and research data, the present study will not make a hypothesis concerning the relationship between drug use and locus of control.

In summary, the present study is designed to examine locus of control in an inmate population as it relates both to inmates' activities and characteristics. The I-E scale will be administered in a manner designed to minimize the influence of social desirability. It is hypothesized that inmates in general will score

more externally than previously reported. It is also hypothesized that white inmates, and those active in inmate organizations, will score more internally than other inmates.

## METHOD

### SUBJECTS

Data were collected on 45 adult male inmates incarcerated in a midwestern medium security penal institution. Four other inmates were contacted, but declined to participate in the study. Fifteen men were randomly selected from each of three groups: inmates being seen in therapy, men assigned to a school program, and those assigned to a work program. The names of subjects to be contacted were selected from institutional records following a random order as determined by a random number table. The mean age of the subjects was 27.5 with a range of 19 to 50, and the mean IQ was 101.3.

### PROCEDURE

The experimenter was a psychology intern who conducted the entire study. He was supervised by a staff psychologist on experimental design and administration of the study. All men were contacted individually by the same experimenter and asked to participate in the study. Subjects were told that they had been randomly selected as part of a study being conducted by the clinical services section on inmates' attitudes. It was explained that clinical services recognized that many inmates with problems did not seek treatment, and it was hoped that the study might help to explain why. It was emphasized that the questionnaire results would be strictly confidential, that attitudes and not actions were being studied, and that the results were descriptive, not evaluative. The forced choice format of the I-E scale was explained, and it was pointed out that while it was easy to "tell them what they want to hear,"

what we were interested in was the individual's true beliefs. The experimenter stated that while the men were completely free to refuse, their cooperation would be greatly appreciated.

After the subjects agreed to participate, the experimenter attempted to answer any questions short of dealing with the locus of control concept. The inmates then completed the I-E scale and the study was explained in greater detail. The men were reassured as to the confidentiality of the results and thanked for their participation.

### DEPENDENT MEASURES

In addition to the locus of control scores, information was also collected on the subject's age, race, IQ, history of drug use, and involvement in institutional organizations and activities. The data on participation in activities was collected from the various organizations' membership rosters. All other information was obtained from the man's institutional file.

### RESULTS

Consistent with earlier studies on locus of control, age was found to significantly correlated with I-E ( $r = -.416, p < .01$ ), while the correlation between IQ and I-E was nonsignificant ( $r = -.185, N.S.$ ). The results indicated that the treatment, school, and work groups did not differ significantly on locus of control ( $F = 1.90, df = 2,39, N.S.$ ) nor were there significant differences in the standard deviations of the groups.

The mean results for I-E by race and drug use are presented in Table 1. Two racial categories were used: "white" and "nonwhite." "White" was defined as Caucasian and without a Spanish surname, the "nonwhite" sample consisted of 16 black inmates and two of Spanish decent. Consistent with earlier studies, the analysis of variance showed a significant main effect for race ( $F = 9.65, df = 1,41, p < .01$ ), with nonwhite inmates scoring more externally.

TABLE 1  
I-E by Race and Drug Use

	No Illicit Drug Use	Illicit Drug Use	$\Sigma$
White	N = 17 SD = 3.91 $\bar{X}$ = 5.53	N = 10 SD = 3.33 $\bar{X}$ = 10.20	N = 27 SD = 4.30 $\bar{X}$ = 7.26
Non white	N = 11 SD = 3.34 $\bar{X}$ = 10.18	N = 7 SD = 3.60 $\bar{X}$ = 11.43	N = 18 SD = 3.39 $\bar{X}$ = 10.67
$\Sigma$	N = 28 SD = 4.30 $\bar{X}$ = 7.36	N = 17 SD = 3.39 $\bar{X}$ = 10.71	N = 45 SD = 4.20 $\bar{X}$ = 8.62

Inmates were divided into two groups on the basis of the drug use history obtained from their institutional file. The "no illicit drug" group consisted of men with no record of any drug use and/or those who used alcohol only. The "illicit drug" group subjects were those whose file indicated past use of any illegal drug including chemicals and/or heroin.<sup>1</sup> A more precise breakdown (such as separating alcoholics) was not attempted due to frequent ambiguities and inaccuracies in the file material. The analysis of variance confirmed that there was a significant main effect of drug use on I-E ( $F = 9.13$ ,  $df = 1,41$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, in contrast with previous research, drug users were more external than nonusers. The interaction of drug use  $\times$  race did not reach statistical significance levels ( $F = 1.95$ ,  $df = 1,41$ , N.S.). An examination of extreme groups of locus of control (+ and - one standard deviation) indicated that race and drug use were not randomly distributed. The extremely internal group ( $n = 11$ ) was almost exclusively white nondrug users, while the

majority of the extremely external group ( $n = 11$ ) was black drug users ( $X^2_7 = 25.0, p < .01$ ).

As noted earlier, many studies have shown that I-E scores are predictive of involvement in a variety of activities. An examination of prisoners' participations in inmate organizations<sup>2</sup> and its relationship to locus of control was undertaken in this study. Inmates active in two or more organizations ( $n = 5, \bar{X}$  I-E = 3.2) were compared to subjects who were not members of any organization ( $n = 18, \bar{X}$  I-E = 8.00) and it was found that uninvolved inmates were significantly more external ( $t^* = 4.36, p < .01$ ). An examination of extreme locus of control groups also found that the internal group accounted for a significantly greater number of memberships than the external group ( $X^2_1 = 4.26, p < .05$ ). Thus, the evidence indicates that the I-E scores obtained in this study are predictive of inmate involvement.

## DISCUSSION

It was originally hypothesized that if evaluation apprehension and demand cues were minimized, prisoners would score more externally than the general population. The mean obtained in this study was in fact higher than those reported in earlier studies (Lefcourt and Ladwig, 1965), and the difference for black inmates reached statistical significance ( $t = 1.89, df = 76, p < .05$ ). This difference between the Lefcourt and Ladwig data and the present results might be seen as a confirmation of the original hypothesis. However, other factors indicate that such a conclusion would be erroneous. Recent publications indicate that in recent years the general population has become much more external, and that the mean I-E score has increased from approximately 8 to about .10 (Parsons and Schneider, 1974; Rotter, 1975).

The present results indicated that the group of inmates being seen in psychotherapy is not significantly more external or more variable than the school and work groups. This evidence provides no support for Rotter's (1966) speculation on the relationship between I-E and maladjustment.

Consistent with earlier research, this study found that I-E scores were predictive of involvement in social activities. Men active in inmate organizations were more internal than uninvolved prisoners. This relationship indicates that the I-E scores obtained under a procedure designed to minimize social desirability are in fact valid indicators of the subject's locus of control. Additionally, the finding that blacks are more external than whites also serves to indicate the validity of the obtained I-E scores, since it is in complete agreement with a large number of previous studies.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the present study is the relationship between drug use and locus of control. In contrast to the majority of earlier studies, drug users were found to be much more external than men with no drug use history. The race and activity data attest to the validity of the obtained I-E scores, so the results tend to support Rotter's (1975) speculation that drug users are actually externally oriented. One probable explanation for the divergent results is the different manner in which subjects were obtained and tested in this study.

Typically, previous studies have tested subjects during a rather ambiguous experimental session or during a routine intake test battery. Moreover, the drug addicts tested usually were selected from a drug treatment program (Lefcourt and Ladwig, 1965; Calicchia, 1974). It has been suggested that such selection and testing procedures serve to maximize the demands for socially appropriate test responses (Naditch, 1975; Rotter, 1975). There is experimental evidence that drug users are particularly attuned to social desirability (Scherer, Ettinger, and Murdick, 1972) and that there is a clear socially desirable stereotype of males being internal (Hochreich, 1975). Therefore, it is proposed that in an ambiguous testing situation, drug users respond by producing a socially desirable internal score that is not a true indication of their actual locus of control.<sup>3</sup> Only under testing procedures that minimize the demands for socially desirable responses do addicts score in a veridical external manner.

While the present results suggest that drug users have scored internally in previous studies due to the demand cues implicit in the procedures, this position cannot yet be accepted as fact. The present study merely demonstrated that drug users tested under a procedure designed to minimize demand cues and assure confidentiality do score in a highly external manner. A study employing a control group of drug users tested during an ambiguous group session is needed to confirm the present findings.

### NOTES

1. Forty-one percent of the illicit drug group were identified in institutional records as known heroin users. Only two members of the no illicit drug use group were identified as alcoholics.

2. The organizations considered were those open to any inmate such as the Jaycees and Conservation Club. Highly specialized groups such as the Muslims and Alcoholics Anonymous were not included.

3. As an initial test of this proposition, 10 inmates were given the I-E scale during a group testing. The normal introduction was employed, confidentiality was not stressed, and no mention was made of the fact that the information would not be placed in the subjects' files. Under these conditions drug users scored more internally ( $\bar{X} = 8.2$ ).

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