



# A functional-contextualist account of locus of control: Generalized control expectancies as derived relational responding

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional definitions state that locus of control determines behavior via automatic properties of generalized control. Mainstream psychology suggests that generalized control is an intrinsic feature of locus of control as it is a socio-cognitive variable of personality. This theoretical paper briefly reviews Rotter's original definition, and then develops an alternative contextualist proposal from Relational Frame Theory (RFT). RFT serves to reformulate the concept of social cognition, as well as to provide an approach to generalized control expectancies as an instance of derived relational responding. A review of three recent experimental studies endorsing this proposal shows its viability. This analysis leads to evidence of the involvement of specific relational frames like CAUSAL and I-OTHERS in control expectancies, as well as other arbitrary relational networks in the transfer/generalization of new expectancies upon novel stimuli and situations.

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## 1. Introduction

Humans, unlike non-verbal organisms, can predict complex environmental relations between their behaviors, their consequences, and new conditions to which they must respond (Skinner, 1974). One example of these predictions is when a person believes that he or she could (or not) cope with some problematic situation. These predictions are called “control expectancies” (Furnham, 2009; Rotter, 1960, 1978). Consequently, it is usual that a person perform several discriminations about task features, as well as about own behavior (even those discriminations that underlie to “control expectancies”, in some cases) in problem-solving situations.

Wilson (2001) considers that expectancies can be directly observable events when dealing with verbally able participants, but not in non-verbal organisms or in humans when cognitive theories postulate that expectancies are a cognitive mediator always present in the determination of behavior. In these cases, expectancies have a status of “hypothetical construct” or of “abstractive variable”. As this way of theorizing introduces mediational mechanisms, functional researchers must study the scientific behavior of the pervasive usage of terms like “expectancies”, “beliefs”, “attributions”, etc. to explain behavior. This is an analysis of causal

theories of behavior corresponding to a Contextualist philosophy of behavioral science that we will briefly return to at the end of the current paper. Contrary to these theories about expectancies, we assume that they are not necessarily always present in the regulation of behavior, but even so, we do consider that predictions and expectancies are a form of human behavior that can regulate other behaviors in some circumstances, and that they have an obvious evolutionary advantage for a verbally capable human. Otherwise, such anticipatory verbal behavior (i.e. control expectancies) would not have evolved in humans. For example, we can say that we can confront our daily work tasks, or that we cannot do anything for eradicating poverty from the world, because it is a matter exceeding our control. Predictions and expectancies can prevent a person from being involved in a future situation or task (or in a novel one with some relation to tasks or situations previously experienced by the person) for which he or she does not have the appropriate repertoire, and this is very important for his or her survival or social wellbeing. Those predictions or expectancies can serve to identify and orient a person to cope with conditions in which he or she is likely to be successful. Finally, like any other issue in nature, control expectancies can have an undesirable side. Thus, an overextended and rigid pattern of expectancies about the control of some events can be damaging, for example, when we expect to be able to control our own uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. These expectancies can work as rules governing a person's attempts to control and avoid those private events. In such a case, we can say that those control

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expectancies are part of a context of rule-following behavior acting as barriers for controlling and conducting life toward a valued direction. Zettle and Hayes (1986) called this rigid pattern of rule-following “reason and control contexts”. Several studies have highlighted its involvement in multiple behavioral disorders (Hayes, Levin, Vilaradaga, Villatte, & Pistorello, 2013). Consequently, these predictions (from now on referred to as “expectancies”), can improve or impair the adaptability of a person to his or her varied and diverse environment. This is the reason why we believe that we must pay more attention to the so-called “control expectancies” from a behaviorist perspective.

A different matter is the way in which we define such “control expectancies”. The aim of this paper is to provide a functional-contextualist account of them, as well as to disseminate the knowledge generated in the recent past about the way expectancies generalize when a similarity between stimuli and situations is not present. These new data will help us to account for the concept of “generalized expectancy” without defining it as an “abstractive personality variable”, or “hypothetical construct”. Until recently, we did not know the whole basis upon which we generalized our thoughts (expectancies included) on future novel tasks or events. We think this is always a challenging enterprise for a behavioral and contextualist scientist.

## 2. A critical view of the traditional approach to “Generalized Control Expectancies”

### 2.1. Original definition

Firstly, we need to revise what the operationalization and original definition of expectancies were, in order to discover their flaws and limitations. Traditionally, when somebody manifests a belief about goal achievement that relies upon themselves or external factors to achieve that goal, that belief would be labeled as “control expectancy” (Rotter, 1954, 1966). On the other hand, psychologists have labelled these types of beliefs “causal attributions” when they occur after behavior. The cognitive level of analysis matches expectancies to beliefs, and this same cognitive level of analysis defines beliefs as “mental representations” (Schwitzgebel, 2006). Nevertheless, as De Houwer (2011) distinguishes, this cognitive level is different from a functional one in several respects. Mainly, the cognitive level builds unobservable explicative mechanisms such as mental constructs, upon behavioral effects and topographies. However, both levels can have a heuristic value to improve their respective scientific goals.

Thus, it is important to note several traditional nuances involved in expectancies. Depending on the moment in which a person describes his or her behavior (before or after behaving), we say that those control or causal explanations are “expectancies” or “attributions; depending on the control or causal relation established through such explanations (I-related or other events-related), we say that they are “internal” or “external”. Finally, depending on whether the expectancy refers to a single or to a series of situations, stimuli or problems, they are “specific” or “general” (see Visdómine & Luciano, 2006 for a conceptual revision of related constructs which are not the concern of this paper).

J. B. Rotter was one of the first authors occupied in systematizing a socio-cognitive theory about both internal/external human control expectancies and attributions. Even nowadays, academic mainstream psychology employs the concept of “locus of control” (Furnham, 2009). Social and clinical psychologists talk of locus of control when a generalized tendency of control expectancies is common to a variety of life areas. However, the definition of this “generalized tendency” is problematic, because it employs a questionnaire-based procedure to assign a role of

“abstractive personality variable” to “locus of control”.

Initially, Rotter (1960, p. 406) suggested “Verbal expectancies are differently affected if the subject believes that it is his own skill that is determining outcome on a task rather than chance or external forces”. Likewise, the author said that expectancies generalize from a specific situation to a series of situations “perceived” as similar or related, but with no further specification at this respect. Soon he concluded that the only means to measure generalized control expectancies was a questionnaire or scale since they were part of a “personality variable” (Rotter, 1966, p. 9). Later, Rotter included new abstract variables like “psychological need”, “semantic generalization”, “need value”, etc., (Rotter, 1975, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1990; Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972). Rotter’s theory made an important original but incomplete and construct-based approach to control expectancies. He did not offer a coherent conceptual account. Fundamentally, we find confusion in his account between “generalization” as a behavioral process, and “generalization” as a description of a more or less concrete control expectancy statement (i.e. in regard to single and specific situations, persons or behaviors, or conversely, to “general life areas” such as “workplace”, “interpersonal relations”, or “teaching practices”).

Several authors have traditionally noted that both control attributions and expectancies play a relevant role in regulating different social behaviors, learning performances, and achievement-related activities (Dams-Webber, 1969; Kristiansen & Eiser, 1986; Lefcourt, 1981, 1982, 1992; Strickland, 1989; Van der Linden & Van der Akker, 2001). They allege properties of generalized and inherent influence over behavior. However, in our view, this theoretical definition has hindered an effective intervention in the relation that control attributions and expectancies have to other behaviors, because traditionally cognitive theories have not attempted to influence behavior, only predict correlations between locus scores and other behavioral events. In addition, traditional theories consider that such a relation is automatic because they are mental mediational mechanisms, and they do not provide a complete operational explanation about how control expectancies generalize to novel conditions (De Houwer, 2011; Kunkel, 1997; Lloyd, 1994).

In the next section, we examine the extent to which traditional experimental studies have dealt with generalization of control expectancies as well as exploring their limitations.

### 2.2. Experimental studies on the generalization of control expectancies

Very few experimental studies to date support an operational conceptualization of the generalization of control estimations inside the specific area of control expectancies (Visdómine & Luciano, 2006). Jessor (1954) trained success or failure on a task, and then programmed three generalization tasks, which varied in goal-relatedness to the training task by decreasing amounts. The author proposed that the results were congruent with the hypothesis of consequence similarity as a factor for expectancy generalization. However, he did not actually manipulate the similarity of consequences (i.e. their topographical dimension); he only manipulated the quantity. Heath (1959) and Vreven and Nuttin (1976) did manipulate task similarity. The former employed a vocabulary task for both training and test stages. The tasks varied on the degree of similarity of the vocabulary presented. The latter study explicitly differentiated between similar and dissimilar tasks when testing generalization of new specific expectancies. Other studies have employed a range of similar tasks (Rychlak, 1958), or tasks progressively labelled from easy to hard (Tennen & Eller, 1977). Glass and Singer (1972) employed a problem-solving task during training and a task not requiring a problem-solving strategy during the

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