



**INDEPENDENT**  
THOUGHT

# Explanations of Resistance to Social Influence

AQA A-Level Psychology – Social Influence

Understanding how and why people resist conformity and obedience pressures is essential for explaining human behaviour in social contexts.



**by Stephen Renwick**

# What is Resistance to Social Influence?

Resistance refers to the ability to withstand pressure to conform or obey. It's crucial when individuals act against majority opinion or unjust authority.

## Conformity Resistance

Standing firm against group pressure to adopt majority views or behaviours.

## Obedience Resistance

Refusing to follow orders from authority figures when they conflict with personal values.

## Independence

Maintaining individual judgement despite social pressure to change.



# Locus of Control (LOC)

Proposed by Rotter (1966), LOC refers to beliefs about what controls events in our lives.

## External LOC

People believe external factors control their behaviour.

- Less likely to resist influence
- Depend more on others' opinions

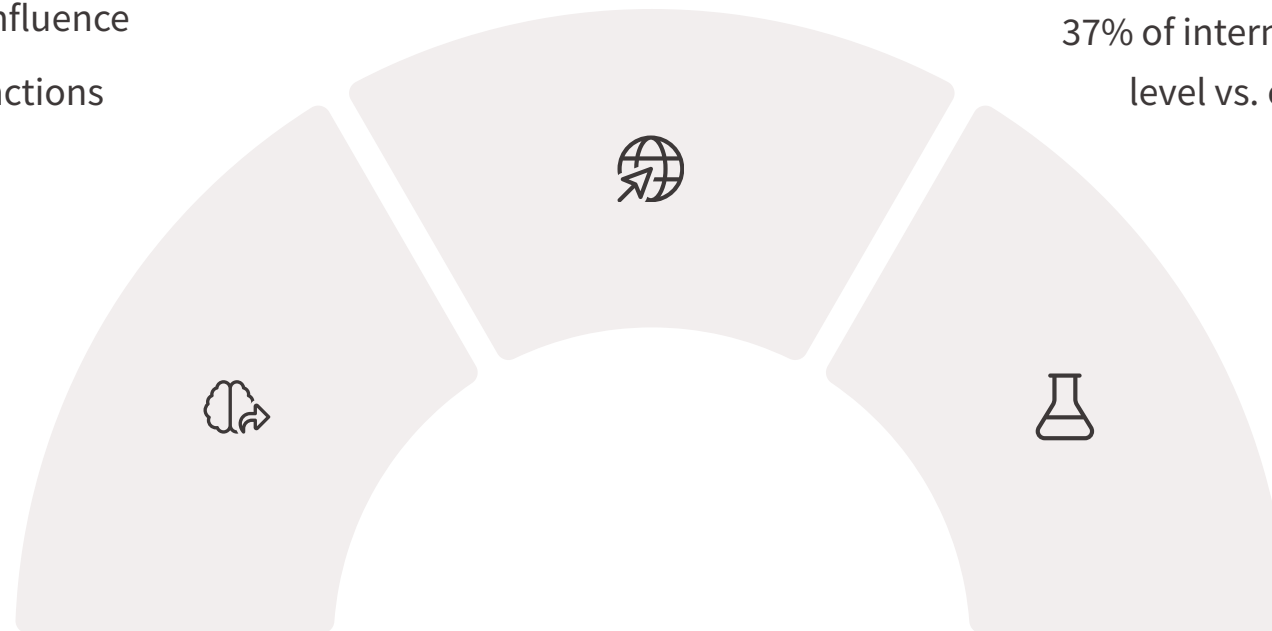
## Internal LOC

People believe they control their own behaviour and outcomes.

- More likely to resist influence
- Feel responsible for actions

## Holland (1967)

37% of internals refused highest shock level vs. only 23% of externals.





# Resisting Social Influence: Social Support and LoC

## Social Support and Resisting Conformity

Social support refers to the presence of people who resist pressures to conform or obey, acting as role models and providing others with the confidence to do the same. When individuals see someone else resisting group pressure, they are more likely to resist it themselves.

This is especially relevant in situations involving conformity, where a group majority exerts pressure on an individual to behave or think in a particular way.

## Asch (1956): The Power of a Dissenter

In Asch's classic line judgment experiment:

- Participants were asked to match a line to one of three comparison lines.
- The real participant was seated among a group of confederates who all gave the same incorrect answer on critical trials.

In the original study, conformity occurred in 33% of critical trials. However, when Asch introduced a dissenter—a confederate who gave the correct answer:

Conformity dropped to just 5.5%

This suggests that the presence of an ally who breaks unanimity gives individuals the courage to resist group pressure, even if that ally is wrong in a different way.

## Why Does Social Support Help?

- It breaks the unanimity of the majority, which is a key factor in producing conformity.
- The dissenter reduces normative pressure, making it psychologically easier to disagree with the group.
- It increases independent behavior, as the individual is no longer isolated in their viewpoint.



## Social Support and Resisting Obedience

### Disobedient Role Models and Social Support

In situations involving obedience, social support can also help individuals resist pressure from an authority figure. When people see others disobeying unjust or harmful orders, it provides them with a model of dissent to follow. This reduces the perceived legitimacy of the authority and strengthens personal confidence to resist.



### Milgram's Variation: Disobedient Peers (Team of Three)

Milgram conducted a variation of his famous obedience study to test the influence of social support in the form of disobedient peers.

- The participant was placed in a team of three "teachers."
- The two other teachers were actually confederates.
- All three were instructed to administer shocks to the learner, but the confederates were instructed to refuse to continue partway through the procedure and walk out in defiance of the experimenter.

Result:  
When the participant witnessed the two peers defying authority:

Only 10% of participants continued to the full 450 volts.

This is a dramatic drop compared to the 65% obedience rate in Milgram's original study.

## Why Does Disobedient Support Help?

- Seeing others disobey reduces the pressure to obey, suggesting it's socially acceptable to resist.
- It breaks the illusion of consensus, showing that the authority figure can be challenged.
- Provides a powerful normative and informational influence:
  - Normative – you're not the only one going against the authority.
  - Informational – you trust others' judgments that the authority is wrong.

## Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966)

Locus of control (LoC) is a psychological concept developed by Julian Rotter to explain how people perceive the causes of their behavior and life events. It exists on a continuum from internal to external.

### Internal Locus of Control

- People with a high internal locus of control believe that they are responsible for what happens to them.
- They feel they have control over their own behavior and life outcomes.
- Examples:
  - "I failed the test because I didn't revise enough."
  - "I can make my own decisions."

These individuals tend to be:

- More confident
- More independent
- More resistant to pressure from others

### External Locus of Control

- People with a high external locus of control believe that external factors control their life.
- They attribute outcomes to luck, fate, or powerful others.
- Examples:
  - "I failed because the teacher didn't like me."
  - "There's no point trying – things just happen."

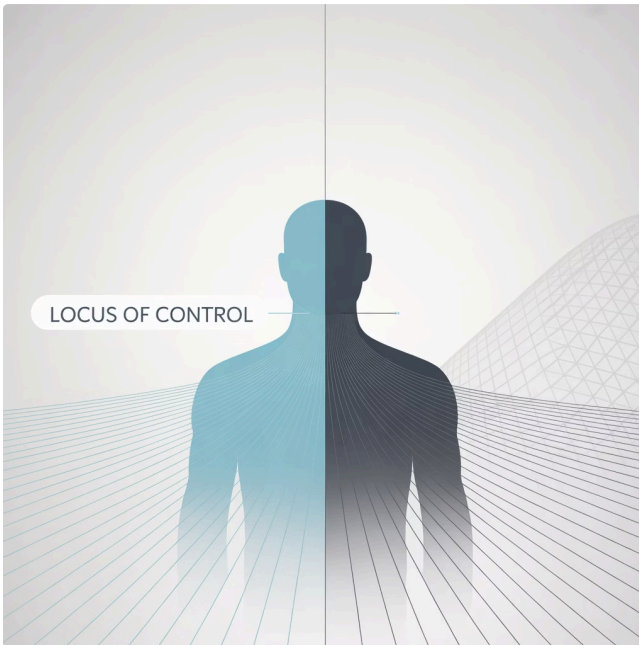
These individuals tend to:

- Feel less in control
- Be more passive
- Be more likely to conform or obey

## Locus of Control and Resisting Social Influence

People with a high internal locus of control are more likely to resist pressures to conform or obey, because:

- They feel responsible for their own actions.
- They are more confident and less reliant on social approval.



## Supporting Research

### Spector (1982)

- Found that locus of control was related to normative social influence.
- Individuals with a high internal LoC were less likely to conform in situations involving normative pressure (desire to be liked).
- However, there was no difference in susceptibility to informational social influence.

### Hutchins & Estey (1978)

- Studied decision-making in high-pressure military simulations.
- Found that participants with a high internal locus of control were better at resisting orders and making independent decisions under pressure.



# Evaluation of Social Support

## **Evidence from Asch's Variation (1956)**

Asch found that the presence of a dissenter reduced conformity from 33% to just 5.5%. This shows that social support breaks the unanimity of the group and reduces normative pressure, allowing individuals to behave more independently.

## **Allen & Levine (1969)**

### Supporter's Position Matters

In a replication of Asch's study, Allen and Levine varied the position of the dissenter. When the dissenter spoke early (e.g., first in the group), it was more effective in reducing conformity than if they spoke later. This suggests the timing of support is important, and that early dissent is more empowering to others. Additionally, conformity dropped even when the dissenter wore thick glasses and admitted to having poor vision, suggesting that any dissent—even if not credible—can reduce pressure to conform.

## **Rees & Wallace (2015)**

### Friend-Based Social Support

Investigated adolescents' resistance to peer pressure around drinking. Found that those who had at least one friend who also resisted conforming to group norms were significantly less likely to engage in risk behaviors like drinking. This supports the idea that peer-based social support is particularly powerful in everyday real-world settings. It highlights the importance of close social ties in encouraging independent behavior, especially during adolescence.

## **Real-Life Support**

### The Rosenstrasse Protest (1943)

In Nazi Germany, a group of German women (wives of Jewish men) protested in Rosenstrasse, Berlin, demanding the release of their husbands who had been arrested by the Gestapo. Despite the threat of violence, the women resisted Nazi authority—and eventually, the men were released. This real-world example illustrates that social support in the form of group solidarity can empower people to resist even powerful authoritarian regimes.

These studies and real-world events provide strong support for the role of social support in resisting social influence. Whether through early dissent, peer encouragement, or group solidarity, social support clearly enhances individual confidence and reduces conformity and obedience. It also highlights the power of collective resistance, even under severe social or political pressure.



# Evaluation of Locus of Control

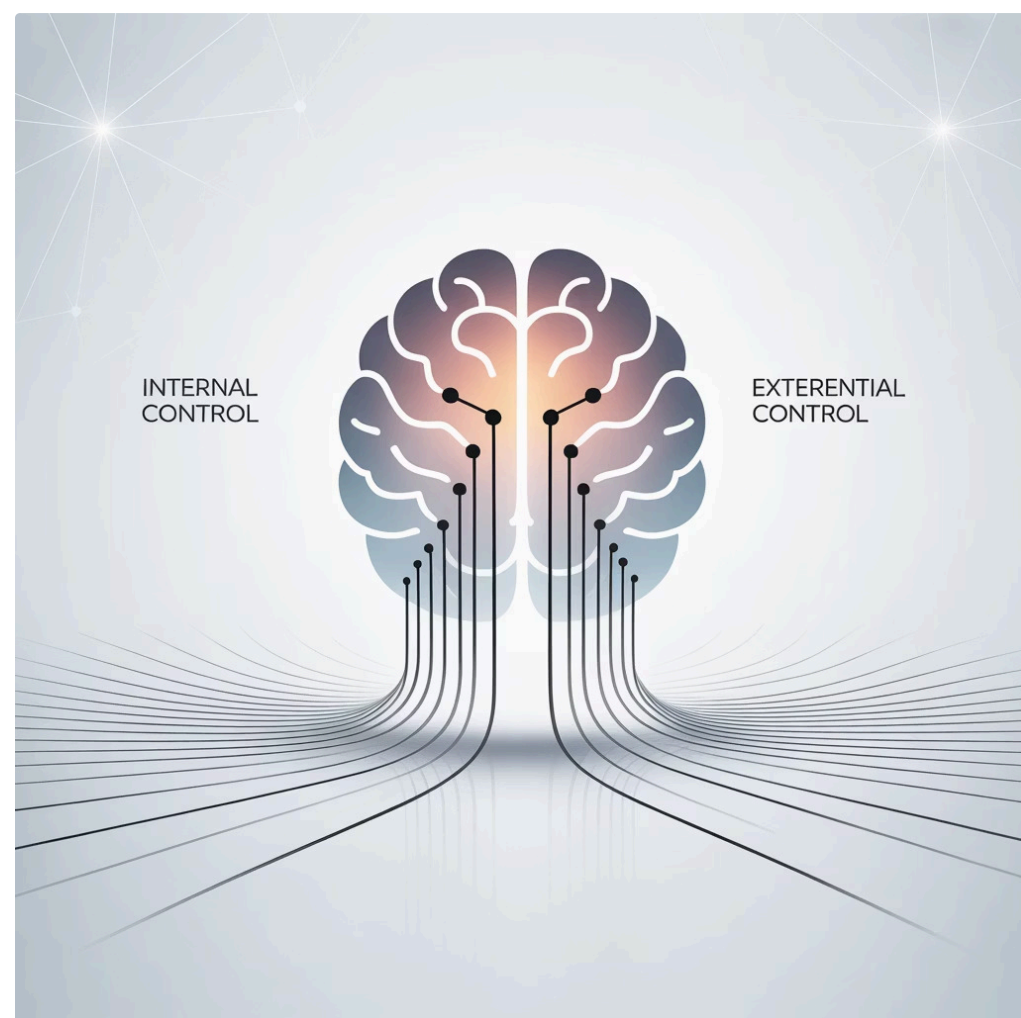
## Evaluation of Locus of Control in Resisting Social Influence

### Spector (1983)

#### Normative vs. Informational Influence

Spector measured locus of control and susceptibility to normative and informational social influence in 157 undergraduates. He found that individuals with a high internal locus of control were less likely to conform in situations involving normative pressure (e.g., desire to be liked).

However, there was no difference between internals and externals in response to informational social influence (desire to be right). This supports the idea that internal LoC helps resist conformity, particularly in situations where peer pressure is strong.



### Twenge et al. (2004)

#### Changes Over Time

Twenge conducted a meta-analysis of American studies from 1960 to 2002 and found that young Americans became more external over time. This was accompanied by an increase in problems such as depression, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness. This suggests that a high external locus is linked with less personal control and greater vulnerability to social influence.

However, despite becoming more external, people today may also be more resistant to obedience due to growing social awareness and education — raising questions about the consistency of the LoC explanation.

### Avtgis (1998)

#### Meta-Analysis of Locus and Conformity

Avtgis reviewed multiple studies examining the link between locus of control and conformity and found a positive correlation: People with a high external locus were more likely to conform than those with a high internal locus. This offers strong quantitative support for Rotter's theory and shows that LoC is a reliable predictor of conformity across various contexts.

### Limitations of Locus of Control

Locus of control may not be consistent across all situations – a person could act independently in one context but conform in another. LoC is also likely to interact with other factors, such as confidence, social support, or task importance. The correlational nature of many studies means we can't prove causation – e.g., does having an external locus cause conformity, or do conformists tend to develop external views?

### Conclusion

Locus of control is a valuable concept in understanding individual differences in resistance to social influence.

Research by Spector, Avtgis, and Twenge provides consistent evidence that those with a high internal locus tend to be more resistant to conformity and obedience. However, the explanation should be seen as one part of a wider picture, which includes social support, confidence, and context.

# Questions

Explain the role of social support in resisting social influence. (6)

Explain the difference between internal and external locus in relation to social influence. (4)

Outline and evaluate the role of social support and locus of control in resisting social influence. (16)

