

Locus of Control and Eco-Anxiety among College Students in India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Eco-anxiety, the worry and distress that people experience in response to environmental degradation and climate change, is increasingly reported among young adults. Locus of control, the extent to which people believe that outcomes depend on their own actions or on external forces, may be relevant to how such distress is experienced, yet few studies have examined the two constructs together among college students. **Objectives:** The present study examined the relationship between locus of control and eco-anxiety among college students. **Methods:** A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design was used. A sample of 201 college students aged 18 to 26 years was recruited through convenience sampling and completed an online survey comprising a demographic questionnaire, the Multidimensional Health Locus of Control Scales, which assess internal, powerful others and chance control beliefs, and the Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation and multiple linear regression. **Results:** The mean eco-anxiety score was 10.76 ($SD = 7.94$). Internal locus of control was not significantly correlated with eco-anxiety ($r = -.05$, $p = .524$), whereas powerful others beliefs ($r = .30$) and chance beliefs ($r = .33$) were significantly and positively correlated with eco-anxiety (both $p < .01$). In a regression model with powerful others and chance as predictors, the two external dimensions together explained 12% of the variance in eco-anxiety ($R^2 = .120$, $F(2, 198) = 13.454$, $p < .001$); chance beliefs made a significant unique contribution ($\beta = .23$, $p = .012$), whereas powerful others beliefs did not ($\beta = .14$, $p = .124$). **Conclusion:** The findings indicate that stronger external control beliefs, particularly the belief that outcomes are a matter of chance, are associated with higher eco-anxiety among college students, whereas internal control beliefs show no such association. Because the design was cross-sectional and the sample was a convenience sample, these associations should not be interpreted as causal. The results suggest that approaches which strengthen students' sense of agency and constructive engagement with environmental issues merit examination in future intervention research.

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Eco-anxiety refers to the worry, fear and distress that people experience in relation to environmental degradation and climate change. Because it arises in response to real and well-documented threats, scholars have argued that it should not be regarded simply as irrational or pathological, and that adaptive and maladaptive levels of such anxiety need to be distinguished (Clayton, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). Climate change anxiety appears to be relatively common, particularly among younger adults, and everyday worry about climate change can be differentiated from anxiety that seriously affects a person's cognitive, emotional and daily functioning (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). In a survey of 10,000 people aged 16 to 25 years in ten countries, including India, 59% of respondents reported being very or extremely worried about climate change, more than half reported feeling sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless or guilty, and more than 45% said that their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning (Hickman et al., 2021).

Young adulthood is a period of identity exploration in which people make decisions about education, work, relationships and their future, and the years from the late teens to the mid-twenties have been described as a distinct developmental stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Climate change may complicate this process because it raises uncertainty about the future in which these plans will unfold, and it has been argued that climate change can affect mental health and well-being not only through direct exposure to its effects but also through emotional responses, such as despair, to the threat it poses (Fritze et al., 2008). In the global survey described above, 75% of young respondents said that they think the future is frightening (Hickman et al., 2021). Young people have a large stake in the outcomes of present-day climate decisions, and many express their concern through diverse forms of activism and dissent (O'Brien et al., 2018).

Pihkala (2020) has noted that eco-anxiety is closely connected with other difficult emotions, such as grief, guilt, anger and despair, but that it can also have an adaptive, practical dimension that is linked to motivation and hope. Clayton (2020) has also argued that a focus on individual mental health should not distract attention from the societal response that is needed to address climate change. Research on climate communication has noted that direct evidence on whether frightening climate messages motivate action is limited, although wider research supports the qualified effectiveness of fear appeals (Reser & Bradley, 2017). Such observations, together with the wide variation in young people's emotional responses, suggest that individual psychological factors, such as how people cope with climate change and how much control they believe they have, may help to explain why some young people experience more distress than others (Ojala, 2013).

One such factor is locus of control. Locus of control, first conceptualised by Rotter (1966), refers to a generalised expectancy about whether the outcomes a person experiences depend on their own behaviour or on forces outside their control. An internal locus of control reflects the belief that outcomes are largely determined by one's own efforts and actions, whereas an external locus of control reflects the belief that outcomes are determined mainly by luck, fate, chance or powerful others (Rotter, 1966). A more internal locus of control has been associated with higher academic achievement (Findley & Cooper, 1983) and, in a meta-analysis of workplace research, with favourable outcomes such as greater job satisfaction and

well-being (Ng et al., 2006). Locus of control has also been studied extensively in relation to how people respond to and cope with challenging life circumstances (Lefcourt, 1982).

Locus of control is also relevant in the environmental domain. Climate change is a global and systemic problem that depends on governments, organisations and collective action, so many individuals may feel that their personal influence over it is limited. In a large study of young Australians, those with a more internal locus of control in relation to the environment reported stronger pro-environmental intentions and behaviour and less environmentally harmful behaviour, whereas attributing greater responsibility for environmental protection to the government was related to weaker pro-environmental intentions and behaviour (Fielding & Head, 2012).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The link between control beliefs and responses to environmental threats can be understood through the transactional model of stress and coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), according to which emotional responses to a stressor depend on the appraisal of the threat and of the resources available to cope with it. Applying this framework to environmental problems, Homburg and Stolberg (2006) proposed that environmental stressors, through appraisals of demands and coping resources, can activate problem-focused coping and, in turn, pro-environmental behaviour, and they examined the role of perceived collective efficacy in such coping. Climate change is widely perceived as a serious threat (Clayton, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021), but people differ in how far they believe that they, or the groups they belong to, can do anything about it.

Several studies have examined how different forms of concern and coping relate to distress. Helm et al. (2018) found that, among United States adults, only those higher in biospheric environmental concern perceived ecological stress; perceived ecological stress was positively associated with depressive symptoms, whereas ecological coping was associated with fewer depressive symptoms and more pro-environmental behaviour. Ojala (2013) found that, among Swedish adolescents, problem-focused coping and meaning-focused coping were positively related to environmental efficacy and pro-environmental behaviour, that problem-focused coping was associated with more worry about climate change, and that meaning-focused coping was related to greater well-being and optimism. Verplanken and Roy (2013) found that habitual ecological worrying showed a near-zero correlation with pathological worry and was instead associated with pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, suggesting that worry about the environment can be a constructive response. Clayton and Karazsia (2020), in developing a measure of climate change anxiety, found that climate change anxiety was related to negative emotions but not to behavioural engagement.

Despite this growing literature, the relationship between locus of control and eco-anxiety has rarely been examined directly. Much of the existing research addresses efficacy, coping or concern rather than the internal and external control beliefs described by Rotter (1966), and most studies have been conducted in Western countries (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Fielding & Head, 2012; Helm et al., 2018; Ojala, 2013). Studies that examine the separate dimensions of locus of control, rather than a single internal–external continuum, are particularly scarce. The present study therefore examined the relationship between the internal, powerful others and chance dimensions of locus of control and eco-anxiety among college students in India.

Objectives

1. To assess the level of eco-anxiety among college students.
2. To examine the relationship between the dimensions of locus of control (internal, powerful others and chance) and eco-anxiety among college students.
3. To examine whether the dimensions of locus of control significantly predict eco-anxiety among college students.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There will be a significant relationship between the dimensions of locus of control and eco-anxiety among college students.
- **H2:** The dimensions of locus of control will significantly predict eco-anxiety among college students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design was used to examine the relationship between locus of control and eco-anxiety without manipulating either variable.

Participants

The sample consisted of 201 college students aged 18 to 26 years, recruited through convenience sampling via university networks, classroom announcements and online communication platforms. Students with a diagnosed severe psychological disorder were not eligible, and incomplete or inconsistent responses were excluded before analysis. Most participants were aged 21 to 23 years (56.7%), and most identified as female (73.6%). With respect to educational level, 51.7% reported a postgraduate degree, 41.3% an undergraduate degree, 3.0% school education up to Class 12, 2.5% a doctorate and 1.5% other qualifications. Most participants lived in urban areas (81.1%). The full sociodemographic profile is presented in Table 1.

Tools and Measures

- **Demographic questionnaire.** Participants reported their age, gender, educational level and place of living.
- **Multidimensional Health Locus of Control (MHLC) Scales.** Locus of control was assessed using the MHLC Scales developed by Wallston et al. (1978). Based on Rotter's social learning theory, the MHLC Scales measure beliefs that the source of reinforcement for health-related outcomes is primarily internal, under the control of powerful others, or a matter of chance. The scales comprise 18 items forming three six-item subscales: Internal (for example, beliefs that one's own behaviour determines one's health), Powerful Others (beliefs that health depends on other people, such as doctors and family) and Chance (beliefs that health is a matter of luck or fate). Items are rated on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), so that each subscale score can range from 6 to 36, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of that source of control. The developers reported internal consistency and validity data for equivalent forms of the scales (Wallston et al., 1978). Because the three dimensions are conceptually distinct, the MHLC is scored by subscale, and the subscale scores were used in the correlation and regression analyses. For descriptive purposes, a total score summing all 18 items (possible range 18–108) is also reported; this total is not a standard MHLC score and does not indicate a more internal or a more external orientation.

- **Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale (HEAS).** Eco-anxiety was assessed using the HEAS developed by Hogg et al. (2021) in Australia and New Zealand. The scale consists of 13 items that capture four dimensions of eco-anxiety: affective symptoms, rumination, behavioural symptoms and anxiety about one's negative impact on the planet. Respondents indicate how often they have been bothered by each experience over the past two weeks on a four-point scale (0 = not at all, 1 = several of the days, 2 = over half the days, 3 = nearly every day), and higher scores indicate greater eco-anxiety. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the four-factor structure, and each dimension was distinct from stress, anxiety and depression (Hogg et al., 2021).

Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms. Participants first read a digital consent form that described the purpose of the study and the procedure, stated that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences, and explained that there were no known risks and that all data would be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes. After providing consent, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire followed by the MHLC Scales and the HEAS, each with standard instructions. The survey took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

Ethical Considerations

Digital informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Responses were anonymous, no personally identifying information was collected, and the data were used solely for academic purposes and are reported only in aggregate form.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21. Data were first screened for completeness and inconsistent response patterns. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis) were computed for the study variables, and skewness and kurtosis values within ± 2 were taken to indicate approximate normality. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationships between the three locus of control dimensions and eco-anxiety (H1). Because internal locus of control was not significantly correlated with eco-anxiety, multiple linear regression was conducted with the two external dimensions, powerful others and chance, entered as predictors and eco-anxiety as the criterion (H2). A significance level of $p < .05$ was used for all inferential analyses.

RESULTS

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 201 participants are presented in Table 1. The largest age group was 21 to 23 years ($n = 114$, 56.7%), followed by 24 to 26 years ($n = 54$, 26.9%) and 18 to 20 years ($n = 33$, 16.4%). Most participants identified as female ($n = 148$, 73.6%); 48 (23.9%) identified as male, one (0.5%) identified as belonging to another gender category and four (2.0%) preferred not to disclose their gender. Postgraduate degree holders formed the largest educational group ($n = 104$, 51.7%), followed by participants with an undergraduate degree ($n = 83$, 41.3%). Most participants lived in urban areas ($n = 163$, 81.1%), followed by semi-urban ($n = 19$, 9.5%) and rural areas ($n = 16$, 8.0%), and three (1.5%) preferred not to disclose their place of living.

Table 1 Sociodemographic Profile of the Sample (N = 201)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	18–20	33	16.4
	21–23	114	56.7
	24–26	54	26.9
Gender	Female	148	73.6
	Male	48	23.9
	Other	1	0.5
	Prefer not to say	4	2.0
Educational level	School (up to Class 12)	6	3.0
	Undergraduate degree	83	41.3
	Postgraduate degree	104	51.7
	Doctorate	5	2.5
	Other	3	1.5
Place of living	Urban	163	81.1
	Semi-urban	19	9.5
	Rural	16	8.0
	Prefer not to say	3	1.5

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 2. The mean locus of control total score was 78.71 ($SD = 18.71$), and the mean eco-anxiety score was 10.76 ($SD = 7.94$). The skewness (-0.08 and 0.69) and kurtosis (1.90 and -0.09) values for both variables fell within ± 2 , indicating approximately normal distributions suitable for parametric analysis. The standard deviation of eco-anxiety scores indicates considerable variation in eco-anxiety across participants.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables (N = 201)

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Locus of control (MHLC total)	78.71	18.71	-0.08	1.90
Eco-anxiety (HEAS)	10.76	7.94	0.69	-0.09

Note. MHLC total = sum of all 18 Multidimensional Health Locus of Control items (not a standard MHLC score); HEAS = Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale.

Pearson correlations among the three locus of control dimensions and eco-anxiety are presented in Table 3. Internal locus of control was not significantly correlated with eco-anxiety ($r = -.045$, $p = .524$). In contrast, both external dimensions were positively correlated with eco-anxiety: powerful others ($r = .301$, $p < .01$) and chance ($r = .330$, $p < .01$). Thus, participants who more strongly endorsed the belief that outcomes depend on powerful others or on chance reported higher eco-anxiety. The powerful others and chance dimensions were strongly correlated with each other ($r = .69$), and both showed small positive correlations with internal locus of control ($r = .26$ and $.28$, respectively). H1 was therefore partially supported: the external dimensions, but not the internal dimension, were significantly related to eco-anxiety.

Table 3 Pearson Correlations Among Locus of Control Dimensions and Eco-Anxiety (N = 201)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Internal	—			
2. Powerful Others	.26**	—		
3. Chance	.28**	.69**	—	
4. Eco-anxiety	-.05	.30**	.33**	—

Note. Variables 1–3 are Multidimensional Health Locus of Control subscales. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

A multiple linear regression was conducted with powerful others and chance as predictors and eco-anxiety as the criterion (Table 4). The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 198) = 13.454$, $p < .001$, and the two external dimensions together explained 12.0% of the variance in eco-anxiety ($R = .35$, $R^2 = .120$, adjusted $R^2 = .111$). Chance made a significant unique contribution ($\beta = .23$, $t = 2.54$, $p = .012$), whereas powerful others did not ($\beta = .14$, $t = 1.54$, $p = .124$). Given the strong correlation between the two predictors, this pattern suggests that the variance they share accounted for much of the association with eco-anxiety, with chance beliefs contributing over and above powerful others beliefs. H2 was therefore partially supported: the external dimensions of locus of control significantly predicted eco-anxiety as a set, but only chance was a significant individual predictor, and internal locus of control was not included in the model because it was not related to eco-anxiety.

Table 4 Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Eco-Anxiety from the External Locus of Control Dimensions (N = 201)

Predictor	β	t	p
Powerful Others	.14	1.54	.124
Chance	.23	2.54	.012

Model summary: $R = .35$, $R^2 = .120$, adjusted $R^2 = .111$, $F(2, 198) = 13.454$, $p < .001$

Note. Criterion = eco-anxiety (Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale score). β = standardised regression coefficient.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between locus of control and eco-anxiety among college students. Stronger beliefs that outcomes are determined by powerful others or by chance were associated with higher eco-anxiety, whereas internal locus of control was unrelated to eco-anxiety. Together, the two external dimensions explained 12% of the variance in eco-anxiety, with chance beliefs making the only significant unique contribution. Both hypotheses were therefore partially supported. Although modest in size, these associations are consistent with the view that beliefs about control are relevant to how people appraise and respond to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rotter, 1966).

The positive association between external control beliefs and eco-anxiety can be interpreted within the transactional model of stress, in which distress is greater when a threat is appraised as serious and the resources for dealing with it are appraised as limited (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Students who generally believe that outcomes are controlled by other people or by chance may be more likely to appraise climate change as a threat over which they have little influence, which could contribute to greater worry and distress. This interpretation is consistent with findings that young people's distress about climate change is accompanied by feelings of powerlessness and helplessness and by negative evaluations of government responses (Hickman et al., 2021), and with evidence that attributing environmental

responsibility to the government is related to weaker pro-environmental intentions, whereas an internal environmental locus of control is related to stronger ones (Fielding & Head, 2012). The finding that chance, rather than powerful others, made the unique contribution may be because powerful others beliefs leave room for the possibility that someone, such as experts or authorities, can act, whereas chance beliefs imply that outcomes are unpredictable and cannot be influenced by anyone. This explanation is, however, speculative and requires direct testing.

The absence of a relationship between internal locus of control and eco-anxiety is also noteworthy. One possible explanation is that climate change differs from many personal stressors because its resolution depends on collective and institutional action, so a general belief in personal control may not translate into a sense of control over climate outcomes. Research has highlighted the role of collective efficacy and coping in responses to environmental problems (Homburg & Stolberg, 2006; Ojala, 2013), which suggests that collective forms of control may be more relevant to eco-anxiety than individual control beliefs. It is also possible that a stronger sense of personal agency is associated both with greater concern and with more constructive coping, so that its links with eco-anxiety cancel out; findings that problem-focused coping is associated with both pro-environmental engagement and greater climate worry (Ojala, 2013), and that ecological worry is associated with pro-environmental behaviour (Verplanken & Roy, 2013), are consistent with this possibility. A further consideration is that the MHLC measures control beliefs about health rather than about the environment or life in general (Wallston et al., 1978), so domain-specific measures of environmental control beliefs may show different patterns.

The levels of eco-anxiety observed should also be interpreted with care. Eco-anxiety was present to varying degrees in this sample, but clinical norms for the HEAS have yet to be established (Hogg et al., 2021), so the scores cannot be classified by severity, and higher scores should not be equated with psychopathology. Previous research has shown that ecological worry can be a constructive and adaptive response to a real threat (Pihkala, 2020; Verplanken & Roy, 2013), and that a distinction needs to be drawn between adaptive concern and anxiety that impairs functioning (Clayton, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study found that external locus of control beliefs, but not internal locus of control, were positively associated with eco-anxiety among college students. Beliefs that outcomes depend on powerful others or on chance together explained 12% of the variance in eco-anxiety, and chance beliefs made the only significant unique contribution. Although the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions, the findings suggest that perceived control is relevant to understanding climate-related distress among young people, and that efforts to support students' sense of agency and constructive engagement with environmental issues merit further investigation.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; “prediction” in the regression analysis refers to statistical prediction only, and eco-anxiety may also influence control beliefs. Second, the convenience sample was predominantly female and urban, and over half of the participants reported a postgraduate degree, which limits generalisability to the wider population of college students in India. Third, both variables were measured by self-report, so the results may be affected by social desirability and shared-method variance. Fourth, locus of control was assessed with a health-

specific measure, and the descriptive statistics reported for locus of control are based on a total score that combines internal and external items and is not a standard MHLC score. Fifth, the HEAS was analysed as a total score, so the relationships between locus of control and the four dimensions of eco-anxiety could not be examined. Finally, other variables that may be relevant, such as collective efficacy, coping strategies, environmental engagement and social support, were not measured.

Implications

The findings suggest that students' beliefs about control may be relevant to how they experience climate-related distress. Educational and counselling programmes that address eco-anxiety might therefore benefit from helping students to identify meaningful individual and collective actions, to develop constructive ways of coping and to validate their environmental concerns, rather than focusing solely on raising awareness of environmental threats (Ojala, 2013; Pihkala, 2020). Such approaches would need to be evaluated in intervention studies before firm recommendations can be made.

Future Directions

Longitudinal designs are needed to examine the direction of the associations between locus of control and eco-anxiety. Future studies should report descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for each MHLC subscale, consider measures of general or environment-specific locus of control, and examine the relationships between locus of control and the separate dimensions of eco-anxiety. Future research could also examine whether variables such as collective efficacy, coping strategies, environmental engagement and social support mediate or moderate the relationship between locus of control and eco-anxiety.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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