



## The power of we: Evidence for group-based control<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Group membership may restore a sense of control when personal control is threatened.
- ▶ Thus, threat to personal control should increase group-based cognition and action.
- ▶ Five experiments showed this basic effect.
- ▶ The effect was independent of uncertainty.
- ▶ High ingroup identification and threat to collective control pronounced the effect.

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### ABSTRACT

Membership in social groups may restore people's sense of global control when *personal* control is questioned. Therefore, ethnocentric tendencies might be increased as a consequence of personal control threat. Testing hypotheses derived from a novel model of group-based control in five experiments, we show that making lack of personal control salient increased ingroup bias and pro-organizational behavior (Studies 1–5). These effects were independent of parallel effects of uncertainty (Study 2) and most pronounced for highly identified group members (Study 3). Studies 4 and 5 lend support to the assumption that perceiving the ingroup as a unitary actor is critical for symbolic control restoration: threat to collective homogeneity and agency catalyzed the effect personal control threat had on ingroup support and defense. These findings complement previous research on motivated intergroup behavior and socio-cognitive strategies to cope with deficits in personal control.

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### Introduction

Humans are both helpless and almighty. They are at the mercy of fate and nature, as most individual outcomes and achievements are dependent on external forces. They are not able to protect themselves from strokes of fate, such as losing a partner, becoming unemployed, suffering chronic disease, or even their own death. On the other hand, humans have great potential. People have the ability to mentally move through space and time, to generate goals of high ambition and to pursue them in a coordinated manner. Humans have the potential to travel the

moon, to sustain a global civilization, and even to understand their own psyche. These enormous abilities are reflected in – and perhaps also catalyzed by – people's exaggerated beliefs of being in control over their physical, mental, and social environment (e.g., Langer, 1975). However, this basic sense of global control that imbues people's thinking in everyday life can be deeply shaken when people reflect on their insufficiencies to ultimately control the very basic conditions of their life, such as social inclusion, physical health, or their very existence.

People may try to prevent threats to implicit beliefs in personal control by turning to one of the most important sources of human potency: the group. Humans were able to conquer the world due to their capacity to form shared intentionality and meaningful social groups and institutions (e.g., Tomasello, 2009). The ability to think in terms of “we” instead of “I” has opened the door to collective efficacy and unique collective achievements, such as the creation of great buildings like the Great Wall of China or medieval cathedrals which needed generations of builders to come into existence. Many researchers maintain that it is an individual's position within the

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group that determines her or his evolutionary fitness rather than her or his ability to directly interact with nature (e.g., Brewer & Caporael, 2006) and some authors have defined power and control as an individual's ability to recruit *collective* agency in the service of her or his own agenda (Simon & Oakes, 2006; Turner, 2005).

In the present article, we test hypotheses derived from a novel model of group-based control, stating that people may uphold their basic sense of global control through highlighting group membership and acting as a group member. Specifically, in times when people reflect on the ultimate boundaries of their personal control over important aspects of their life, group membership might become crucial. Then, people may tend to prefer definitions of the self in terms of “we” instead of “I” and act as a group member instead of acting as an individual person. As a result, threat to personal control may increase ethnocentric tendencies in people, such as ingroup support and favoritism and – at times – outgroup derogation. We will outline the model in more detail and present a set of five studies conducted to provide first evidence for processes of group-based control restoration to occur.

### Control motivation

People have a basic desire to perceive important events in their environment as contingent on the will and actions of their self (e.g., Pittman & Zeigler, 2007; Skinner, 1996; White, 1959). In addition, the ideal of agency (to be an agent instead of an object) seems to guide the way in which people construe their self (Preston & Wegner, 2005). Empirical evidence for the importance of control perceptions comes from research showing that people often experience illusions of control in objectively uncontrollable situations such as when drawing lottery tickets (Langer, 1975). Furthermore, perceptions of control and autonomy seem to be essential for human functioning and equanimity as they have been found to increase variables such as well-being, performance, positive emotions and self-esteem (for an overview see Skinner, 1996). Perceptions of *lacking* control in turn increase anxiety and depression (Skinner, 1996).

People are not only motivated to have control in specific situations but also desire a sense of global control generalized over self-relevant events and outcomes (Thompson, 1993). If objective control is restricted individuals might try to re-establish control either in primary or in secondary ways (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). Individuals striving for primary control seek to control the desired outcomes themselves. Secondary control strivings are described as more indirect means of (re-) gaining a sense of control (Skinner, 2007). For example, in processes of vicarious control (Rothbaum et al., 1982) people affiliate with powerful *others* who are assumed to influence outcomes in the desired direction. We propose self-definition as a group member to be an alternative way to restore or maintain perceptions of global control, as here control is exerted through the (social) self and *not* by others.

### Groups and the restoration of control

In research on social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) it has been demonstrated that group memberships serve people to define their self. That is, group attributes and actions may become attributes and actions of the self when people identify with a social group (self-stereotyping; Hogg & Turner, 1987). The social identity approach has emphasized the desire for positive evaluation of the self laying the ground for ingroup identification and ingroup bias. However, recently, some authors have argued that social identity is also related to power and control (Simon & Oakes, 2006; Turner, 2005). These authors stress that “a person or group has power insofar as it recruits human agency in the service of its agenda” (Simon & Oakes, 2006; p. 113). Turner (2005) argues that shared social identities lay the unique foundation of exerting control through others as this kind of power “only emerges from human social relationships, from the

capacity of people to organize themselves into groups, institutions, and societies.” (p. 6).

In contrast to interdependence approaches to group formation (e.g., Sherif, 1966), Turner (2005) and Simon and Oakes (2006) propose that it is *not realistic dependency* which determines group formation and group life. They rather suggest that existing social identities lay the ground for mutual influence among people which in turn leads to the emergence of power and resource control through others. We may add that although group formation might sometimes occur along the lines of shared realistic interests and mutual positive interdependence (Sherif, 1966), realistic interdependence is not sufficient to explain why group membership should have the capacity to restore and maintain a subjective sense of global control. This is because receiving support from others within the group might be a double-edged sword if people want to perceive the *self* (and not others) as having control. This is why we think that social identity rather than mere group membership should be critical for group-based control restoration. Specifically, we propose that people who perceive low personal control may prefer to define their self via the ingroup and act as an ingroup member because this might maintain perceptions of power and control exerted through the (social) self.

There is preliminary evidence for processes of group-based control restoration to occur through the enactment of social identity. Guinote, Brown, and Fiske (2006) demonstrated that social identity as a group member influences individuals' perceptions of control. People who were made to believe that they belonged to a majority group in society anticipated more control in a following group discussion task than those who believed they were part of a minority group. Given the impact of group membership on perceptions of control, people should be motivated to perceive their group as having control. Accordingly, Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, and Scabini (2006) conclude that control motivation is one of various distinct motives that determine identity construction on the individual as well as the group level of the self. The tendency to perceive the ingroup as a unitary actor is also evident in research on group entitativity. Here, social categories are perceived as groups or “real” entities when these can be ascribed both homogeneity and agency (Brewer, Hong, & Li, 2004).

### Motivational explanations of intergroup behavior

In the intergroup literature control motivation has been largely ignored as an independent source of intergroup and ethnocentric behavior. Instead, related, but conceptually distinct, motives have received considerable attention (for an overview see, for instance, Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Uncertainty reduction theory (Hogg, 2007) maintains that defining the self in terms of the ingroup may reduce uncertainty about the self as people can infer characteristics of the self from the ingroup stereotype (self-stereotyping). Findings that ingroup bias is increased under conditions of personal uncertainty (e.g., Grieve & Hogg, 1999) support this approach (for related positions see Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006; Van den Bos, 2009).

In a different influential line of research, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (1997; see also Castano & Dechesne, 2005) have proposed ingroup bias to be rooted in the self-preservation motive. According to terror management theory, defining the self as a group member means to define the self via a death-transcendent entity which is assumed to buffer the potential terror elicited by the awareness of human mortality (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002). In addition, ingroup favoritism has been argued to indicate people's efforts to validate death-transcendent cultural worldviews that – together with personal self-esteem – give people a sense of symbolic immortality (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996). A host of evidence that people exhibit more ingroup bias after having been induced to think about their personal death (e.g., Castano et al., 2002; Giannakakis & Fritsche, 2011; Harmon-Jones et al., 1996) seems to support the terror management approach.

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