Agency Through the We: Group-Based Control Theory

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Abstract

How do people maintain a sense of control when they realize the noncontingencies in their personal life and their strong interdependence with other people? Why do individuals continue to act on overwhelming collective problems, such as climate change, that are clearly beyond their personal control? Group-based control theory proposes that it is social identification with agentic groups and engagement in collective action that serve to maintain and restore people's sense of control, especially when their personal control is threatened. As a consequence, group-based control may enable people to act adaptively and stay healthy even when personal control seems futile. These claims are supported by evidence showing increased in-group identification and group-based action intentions following reminders of low personal control. Furthermore, these responses of identifying with agentic in-groups increase people's perceived control and well-being. This article succinctly presents group-based control theory and relevant empirical findings. It also elaborates on how group-based control relates to other social-identity motives and how it may explain social phenomena.

Keywords

People prefer to be agents rather than objects (Preston & Wegner, 2005). For healthy and productive living, they need to have a sense of autonomous purpose, activity, and personal impact on things they care about (Skinner, 1996). However, individuals are often not as agentic, or in control,[1] as they wish to be. Many things happen and develop in line with the laws of nature rather than through personal will or individuals' contributions. People may recognize this when they reflect on scientific doubts about the existence of free will, observe personal strokes of fate, or realize their inevitable biological demise and mortality (Fritsche et al., 2008). Additionally, as is common for socially living species, humans are highly dependent on and controlled by one another (e.g., through close relationships, work organizations, or state institutions). They are deeply embedded in a multitude of social relations and collectives that determine their outcomes, their courses of action, and even their wishes and desires (e.g., see the long-standing research on social influence). The combination of personal powerlessness and social interdependence becomes outstandingly clear whenever individuals become aware of large-scale, collective demands and challenges that are too big to be solved solely through individual effort, be it a matter of building a temple, establishing public health care, or stopping climate change. How do people manage and reconcile the inherent contradiction between their need for control and the fundamental restrictions of personal agency? How is it possible that most people still feel highly agentic throughout their life?

The answer provided in this article is that individuals' sense of control is based not only on their personal self ("I") but also on their self-definition as a group member ("we"). In other words, people may infer agency not only through personal control but also through the experience of their in-group effectively and autonomously pursuing its collective goals. Given this conception, identified group members could see social interdependence within their group not as an obstacle but rather as a vehicle to perceive agency through their (social) self. In the following, I present a theory that specifies the conditions, nature, and consequences of such *group-based control*. A model of group-based control was first presented in 2008 (Fritsche et al., 2008) and since then

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has developed on the ground of extensive empirical research and theoretical refinements and extensions (Fritsche et al., 2011, 2013; Stollberg, Fritsche, Barth, & Jugert, 2017), which I briefly review and integrate here. Furthermore, I extend earlier presentations of the model by focusing more strongly on the consequences of gaining a sense of collective agency for people's adaptive action and health.

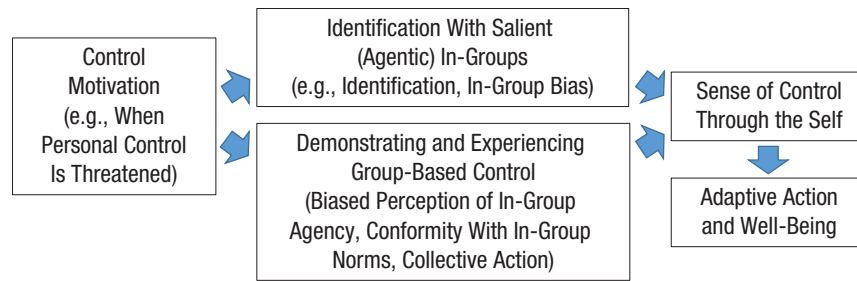## The Basic Tenets of Group-Based Control Theory

Perceiving control through the self is a basic human need, and people in all cultures strive for control (Hornsey et al., 2019). A plethora of research has shown that the experience and perception of personal control determines people's health and performance and that personal helplessness can severely restrict human functioning (Cheng et al., 2013). Researchers diverge in their exact definitions of control and sometimes use different terms for it (e.g., self-efficacy, competence, agency; Skinner, 1996). Integrating these conceptions suggests that there are three interrelated indicators of control that people may use to infer whether or not they are agentic (Preston & Wegner, 2005; Skinner, 1996; Stollberg et al., 2015). First, feeling in control requires having an intrinsic or autonomous goal. Without this, people would consider their behavior as automatic rather than agentic. Second, people should perceive that they are engaging in some form of personal goal-directed action. Third, they should perceive that their own actions affect their environment.

People define their self not only in terms of their idiosyncratic person but often also in terms of their group memberships. According to the social-identity approach (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), whether and to what degree people think of themselves as a person or as an interchangeable member of their group (i.e., social identity) strongly depends on the situation. People adopt a specific social identity (e.g., as a member of a family, nation, or political action group) when they categorize themselves as a member of a social group that is situationally salient and personally accessible. An in-group becomes salient when people perceive members of the group (including themselves) as being similar to each other and dissimilar to an out-group, for instance, in the case of a salient intergroup conflict. As a result of such self-categorization as a group member, people adopt the stereotype of their salient in-group as a self-description. They might also be motivated to adopt certain social identities if those identities satisfy self-related motives, such as self-esteem (through social status; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) or

uncertainty reduction (through a distinct group image; Hogg, 2021). A sense of control can also be one of these social-identity motives.

Group-based control theory proposes that group membership is an important source of control and that people pursue control on the group level to satisfy their basic need for control through the (social) self. In fact, people often think of groups as agents, not just as collections of similar individuals: A family is traveling, a nation is reforming itself, or a political action group is putting pressure on the government. Just as with personal control, indicators of group-based control, or collective agency, should include the perception of autonomous (e.g., distinct) group goals, collective goal pursuit, and impact of the group's activities. When people define the self in terms of a group, its agentic properties become properties of the self ("We have control"). Obviously, people can gain a sense of control through their personal self as well as through one of their many possible social selves (Fritsche et al., 2013). Thus, group-based control theory proposes that motivation for control will lead people to identify more strongly with those (personal or social) identities that they associate with high levels of control. Furthermore, people should be motivated to demonstrate and perceive control not only as a person (when their personal identity is salient) but also as a group (when one of their social identities is salient). In turn, identification with an agentic self (be it personal or social) should elevate people's sense of control, their action intentions, and, ultimately, their overall health (Fig. 1). Whether personal or group-based control becomes relevant in a situation should depend on which level of identity is salient and most likely to provide a sense of control.

It is important to distinguish group-based control through agentic in-groups from possible ways in which people may cope with lacking personal control by supporting out-groups. For instance, people may support groups they do not identify with as an effort of vicarious control when they expect these out-groups to act on behalf of their personal or their in-group's goals (i.e., to serve as tools) or when they try to influence these out-groups to do so (Rothbaum et al., 1982). In a different vein, compensatory-control theory (Landau et al., 2015) assumes that people support social agents external to the self (e.g., out-groups) as a means to restore personal certainty after experiencing a loss of personal control. In contrast to these approaches, group-based control theory assumes that people gain a sense of control through identifying with an agentic group that is a representative of their self on a social level.

Fig. 1. Core predictions of group-based control theory: The motivation for control increases tendencies to identify with salient, agentic in-groups and demonstrate and experience group-based control. In turn, these group-based control efforts should enhance people's sense of control through their social self, which makes adaptive action and well-being more likely.

Is It True? Evidence for Group-Based Control

Three major hypotheses have been derived from the group-based control model and tested in more than 30 published studies to date.

The first hypothesis is that reminding people of personal helplessness should increase their identification with salient social in-groups as an automatic response to defend against threat (Fritsche et al., 2013; Jonas et al., 2014), especially when these groups appear to have control. In experimental studies supporting this hypothesis, the salience of low or high (or sometimes neutral) personal control has been manipulated, for instance, by asking participants to list examples showing that they have low or high control over important aspects of their life (e.g., Fritsche et al., 2013). When low (vs. high) personal control was salient, people identified more strongly with salient and self-relevant in-groups, such as their own nation (Fritsche et al., 2008; Goode et al., 2017). Also, participants in the low-control condition evaluated members of these in-groups more positively than out-group members (Fritsche et al., 2008, 2013) or showed other indicators of in-group identification, such as out-group prejudice (Greenaway et al., 2014), ethnocentrism (Agroskin & Jonas, 2013), nationalism (Fritsche et al., 2017), and the defense of cultural worldviews (Fritsche et al., 2008). These effects of a salient sense of low control were amplified for those groups that people perceived (Stollberg et al., 2015), or were made to perceive (Proudfoot & Kay, 2018), as being particularly agentic.

The second hypothesis is that people may pursue group-based control not only by identifying with agentic in-groups but also through perceiving, experiencing, and exerting control as group members. This hypothesis has been supported by experiments showing that salient low (compared with salient high or neutral) personal control increases perceptions of in-group

homogeneity and entitativity[2] (important conditions of collective agency; Fritsche et al., 2008), active support of in-group goals (e.g., campaigning for a political action group; Fritsche et al., 2008, 2013, 2017), and conformity with salient in-group (but not out-group) norms (Stollberg, Fritsche, & Jonas, 2017).

Group-based control theory assumes that identification with agentic group and demonstrating or exaggerating agentic properties of the in-group are each sufficient means to gain a sense of control through the social self. However, it is still an open question when people adopt each of these two strategies. There is some initial evidence that salient threat to collective control of a potentially agentic in-group drives active efforts of control-deprived group members to demonstrate collective control (e.g., through collective action intentions; Fritsche et al., 2013, 2017).

The third major hypothesis refers to the effects of group-based control. People who can utilize group-based control, compared with those who cannot, should feel more in control, be more willing to act adaptively, and be healthier. Indeed, in a test of this hypothesis, people who identified, or were made to identify, more strongly with their in-group (e.g., their own nation) indicated a higher sense of personal control and well-being (Greenaway et al., 2015). My colleagues and I (Relke et al., 2021) recently showed similar effects for people with various kinds of chronic or potentially terminal diseases. Identification with self-help groups or the group of cancer patients was associated with an elevated sense of control and well-being, particularly when patients perceived these groups to be agentic. Furthermore, the effects of in-group identification on well-being were uniquely mediated by perceptions of greater control, even when we controlled for self-esteem or perceived social support. Other research has investigated the catalyzing role of control motivation for these effects. It found that salient in-group identification and indications of collective agency increased

group members' perceived personal (Greenaway et al., 2015) and collective (Czepluch et al., 2021; Stollberg et al., 2015) control only when low, not high, personal control was made salient.

In some studies, group-based control elevated people's ratings of personal control, whereas in others, only perceptions of collective control were raised. From the perspective of group-based control theory, a possible explanation is that after control on either the personal or the collective level of the self is bolstered, people should feel more overall control through their currently salient self. That is, following restoration of group-based control through immersion in a specific social self, people are more likely to feel control on the collective (rather than the personal) level of the self, and even more so if their personal control has been questioned recently (Czepluch et al., 2021; Stollberg et al., 2015). At the same time, it seems likely that perceptions of group-based control also elevate perceptions of personal control as long as constraints on personal control are not salient in the situation (Greenaway et al., 2015).

Beyond restoring a sense of control and well-being, group-based control also seems to motivate and subjectively empower people to act. Although this motivation to act can drive any kind of action, it also has the potential of enabling adaptive, problem-focused responses to personal and collective challenges. Research on collective action has consistently found perceived collective efficacy to increase people's intention to act to improve the in-group's status (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Collective efficacy also seems to be crucial for motivating private problem-focused behavior in areas where single individuals' actions do not have a significant effect, such as climate protection (Fritsche & Masson, 2021).

These three hypotheses might be only a starting point to empirically test group-based control theory. At the same time, a multitude of more specific hypotheses might be derived from the theory, for instance, by applying it to specific psychosocial contexts.

Is It Unique? Differentiating Group-Based Control From Other Motivational Processes

The motive for group-based control is distinct from other social-identity motives that have been proposed. According to the realistic-conflict approach (Esses et al., 1998), it is people's desire for material resources and safety that binds them to groups that are instrumental in gaining these resources through intragroup cooperation and intergroup competition. However, although possessing resources can sometimes be an indicator of control, it does not have to be. Having a sufficient amount of resources available should satisfy people's

material needs, but the perception of group-based control requires the perception that the group had, or has, control over these resources (e.g., because they obtained the resources through autonomous, goal-directed collective effort). Indeed, threatened control (e.g., in the context of ownership) has been shown to have effects independent of the effects of realistic (e.g., economic) threat (Nijs et al., 2021).

The motive for group-based control is also distinct from self-esteem striving, which was social-identity theory's (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) initial assumption as to why people identify with groups and engage in intergroup conflict. Although control might be an important source of self-esteem, it is conceptually distinct, because control requires not only high social status but also a sense of agency. Accordingly, the indirect effects of in-group identification on well-being through perceived control have been shown to operate even when self-esteem is accounted for (Greenaway et al., 2015; Relke et al., 2021). Furthermore, in other studies, threat to control had an effect on in-group identification even though the control manipulation did not affect self-esteem (Goode et al., 2017), and the effect of threat to control on in-group identification was shown to be moderated by collective agency but not collective status (Stollberg et al., 2015).

Various accounts suggest that people may think and act in terms of group memberships in order to reduce their uncertainty regarding how the world operates and who they are (Hogg, 2021). In a study including orthogonal manipulations of self-concept uncertainty and personal lack of control, both threats independently increased in-group bias in the evaluation of East and West Germans (Fritsche et al., 2013), an indication that uncertainty reduction and control motivation are independent social-identity motives. According to compensatory-control theory (Landau et al., 2015), threatened personal control elicits worries that the world is an unorderly, chaotic (i.e., uncertain) place and that people thus support existing (social) systems and powerful others outside the self whom they expect to provide some order and structure. Research on this model found, for instance, that salient low personal control, compared with salient high personal control, increased people's support for their country's government and economic system and their approval of hierarchies in their own work organization (for a summary, see Stollberg, Fritsche, Barth, & Jugert, 2017). It is difficult to say whether these outcomes in fact represent people's support of systems and agents external to the self (i.e., compensatory control) or rather their support of representatives, norms, or structures of their *own* social self as a group member (i.e., group-based control). Indeed, recent experimental results suggest that threat to control increases approval of in-group
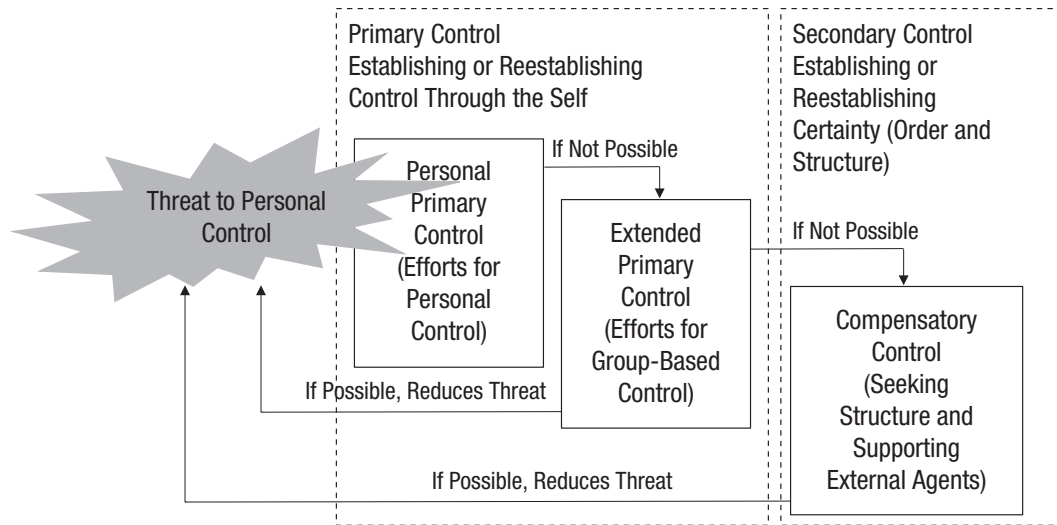
Fig. 2. Integrated stage model of extended and secondary control. This models integrates the theories of group-based control and compensatory control (building on Stollberg, Fritsche, Barth, & Jugert, 2017). After experiencing threat to personal control, people first try to restore control through the personal self (personal primary control); when personal control seems low, they instead try to restore control through the social self (extended primary control, or group-based control). Only if this seems futile, people may aim to reestablish their sense of certainty by means of compensatory control, thereby also indirectly helping to restore their sense of personal control on a later occasion (secondary control).

hierarchies only when people are highly identified with their group (their nation, in Lautenbacher & Fritsche, 2022). Additional studies supporting a primacy of group-based control as a motive behind observed responses to threat to control found that such threat elevated people's approval of social change when change was demanded by the majority of their in-group, but not when it was demanded by the majority within one or more salient out-groups (Stollberg, Fritsche, & Jonas, 2017).

In a preliminary integrative effort, my colleagues and I (Stollberg, Fritsche, Barth, & Jugert, 2017) suggested that people's primary response to threatened personal control is to restore a sense of control through their personal self ("primary control") or, if this seems futile, through a salient and relevant social self ("extended primary control"). When control cannot be restored through the personal or social self, however, people may employ strategies of secondary control that may indirectly help them to regain control on a later occasion by reducing uncertainty (Fig. 2).

Beyond adding a unique motivational explanation, group-based control theory may also challenge earlier motivational accounts of collective cognition. For instance, terror management theory (Castano & Dechesne, 2005) proposes that group membership serves as symbolic immortality of the self, which should explain increased ethnocentric tendencies after reminders of death. From the perspective of group-based control, these effects might be rooted not in people's aim for symbolic immortality, but rather in their desire to regain a sense of control, given that mortality is perhaps the most vivid reminder of limited personal control. In fact, in one study, mortality salience increased in-group identification and support only when it was presented as uncontrollable (Fritsche et al., 2008). Experimental reminders of self-determined death (e.g., imagining committing suicide or setting up a living will) eliminated the effects of mortality salience.

Implications and Conclusion

Identifying with groups and acting as a group member can serve to maintain or restore people's sense of control through the (social) self, and group behavior might often be driven by concerns about control. This perspective not only helps to provide a better understanding of the collective dimension of human behavior but may also be applicable to a range of pressing societal problems. Group-based control has been used to explain collective responses (e.g., authoritarianism, out-group blaming, or intergroup hostility) to societal crises (Fritsche et al., 2011), such as climate change (Fritsche & Masson, 2021) or economic crisis (Bukowski et al., 2017; Fritsche et al., 2017). However, beyond breeding social conflict, social identities have the potential of motivating people to act on large-scale social problems that they cannot solve alone (Fritsche & Masson, 2021). For instance, a recent study conducted during the

COVID-19 crisis found that whether people complied with private health-protection measures was determined not only by their sense of personal threat but also by their perception that their own country was collectively efficacious in tackling the crisis (Hoppe et al., 2021).

Perhaps the automatic group-based responses to threatened personal control will also play their part when the collectives of today and tomorrow need to overcome personal helplessness in the face of unprecedented ecological crises. In fact, salient climate-change threat has been found to increase people's belief in collective (but not personal) efficacy in fighting climate change (Hornsey et al., 2015). Another study found that students' personal willingness to take action against climate change was increased when their perception of the younger generation's efficacy in protecting the climate was increased (Jugert et al., 2016). The effect of collective efficacy was mediated through raising people's belief that they could personally contribute to climate protection. Obviously, humans' propensity to perceive control not only on the personal level but also on collective levels of the self has the potential to unfreeze individuals' paralysis in the face of the great collective challenges of our time. At the same time, as a spillover, when people perceive themselves as being part of a collective endeavor, such as saving the climate, this might not only enable personal action but also improve their health (Relke et al., 2021).

Recommended Reading

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Fritsche, I., Jonas, E., & Kessler, T. (2011). (See References). Reviews and integrates research on individuals' ethnocentric responses to societal crises in terms of different self-motives and on that ground suggests interventions against intergroup conflict and hostility.

Jonas, E., McGregor, I., Klackl, J., Agroskin, D., Fritsche, I., Holbrook, C., Nash, K., Proulx, T., & Quirin, M. (2014). (See References). Explicates the possible bio-socio-psychological mechanisms underlying automatic responses to various kinds of threat, including threat to control.

Pittman, T. S., & Zeigler, K. R. (2007). Basic human needs. In A. W. Kruglanski & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (2nd ed., pp. 473–489). Guilford Press. Provides an overview of different social motives that have been proposed in social-psychological research and reviews central research on control as a basic need.

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Notes

1. In this article, the terms "agency" and "control" are used synonymously.
2. *Entitativity* is the perception that a group is a real entity rather than just a collection of independent people.

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