

# Lack of control leads to less stereotypic perceptions of groups: An individual difference perspective (\*)

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A common feature of human motivation is the desire to be able to influence the environment in a direction that meets the perceiver's needs. Control over one's environment leads to well-being, high self-esteem (Mirowsky & Ross, 1983), higher performance and achievement in school and on the job (Brewin & Shapiro, 1984; Kohn & Schooler, 1982), and prediction of the future (Alloy, Clements & Koenig, 1993). When attempts to change the environment in the desired direction (primary control) do not succeed,

perceivers often adopt other strategies that give them a sense of predictability and potential control. They might seek information effortfully and engage in attributional analyses to increase predictability and understanding (Pittman & D'Agostino, 1985; Pittman & Pittman, 1980; Swann, Stephenson & Pittman, 1981). Perceivers that do not display primary control find often balance by fitting into the environment (secondary control; Rothbaum, Weisz & Snyder, 1982). For instance, minorities change their opinions when facing a majority opinion (e.g. Asch, 1956; Zdzienicki & Levine, 1996), and newcomers acculturate to the new country (e. g. Berry, 1976). Although in appearance secondary control strategies are less effective in providing the perceiver with his goals, their adaptive value should not be neglected (Morlin & Fiske, 1999). This article focuses on group perception as a function of perceived control over one's life.

Perceived control over outcomes refers to the perceived contingency between behavior and outcomes, or to behavior effectiveness (Alloy et al., 1993; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Seligman, 1975). When a perceiver has control over his or her out-

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comes the probability of the outcome given a response is higher than the probability of the outcome in the absence of the response. According to some authors, in addition to their behavior being contingent with the outcome, in order to display control perceivers have to affect the outcome in the desired direction (Alloy et al., 1993).

The concept of perceived control is widely used in psychology, for instance, as related to lack of power (Fiske, 1993), locus of control (Lefcourt, 1976; Rotter, 1966), mastery (Pearlin et al., 1981), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and instrumentalism (Wheaton, 1980). One component of depression is lack of control over desired outcomes (Seligman, 1975; Weary et al., 1993).

In spite of the importance of perceived control over own outcomes, little attention has been devoted to its consequences on social perception (but see Fiske, 1999) and in particular for group perception. On the contrary, social dominance, which is an individual difference variable linked to the tendency to control other group's outcomes has received more attention in research. This article analyzes the extent to which inter-individual differences in perceived control over own life affect group perception. This perspective is informative not only for differential psychology and the understanding of the mechanisms linked to control but also for the understanding of group perception in intergroup contexts characterized by one group having less control over outcomes than the other. In particular, this is relevant for the understanding of perceived group variability by majority vs. minority group members and by powerless vs. powerful group members.

Many factors affect perceived control: Outcome characteristics, like timing or frequency of occurrence of the outcome; context effects, like recent judgments on one's control; self vs. other judgments; public vs. private judgments, individual differences (Alloy et al., 1993), group size (Guinote, Brown, & Fiske, 2000) and outcome dependency (Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Guinote & Fiske, 1999; Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, in press) are all variables that affect the perception of control.

Research on control deprivation has focused on its consequences for the self – for instance, for self-esteem and self-focused attention, Alloy et al., 1993 –, for information seeking, and attributional analyses (Bogart, Ryan & Stefanov, in

press; Erber & Fiske, 1984; Pittman & Pittman, 1980). A well-documented consequence of control deprivation is that perceivers engage in vigilant, effortful information seeking. Low to moderate control deprived participants actively seek and integrate information (e.g. Weary et al., 1993), engage in explanatory attributions (e.g. Pittman & Pittman, 1980), are more accurate when facing the attitude attribution paradigm (Pittman, 1993) and when judging groups (Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, in press). Lack of control is pointed out as one factor that leads low to moderate depressives to display effortful information seeking and relative accurate perceptions (Alloy & Abramson, 1988; Weary et al., 1993). Intergroup research has shown that outcome dependency on outgroup members – when outgroup members control important outcomes – leads to increased attention to stereotype inconsistent information of outgroup members (e.g. Erber & Fiske, 1984). The current article extends these findings to focus on the consequences of perceived control for group perception.

Group perception has been described in terms of two components. One is the central tendency of group members or the prototypical perception of the group. The other component is the group's perceived group variability (Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989). Park and Judd (1990) consider that perceived group variability is linked both to stereotypicality and perceived dispersion of group members. Stereotypicality refers to the extent to which the group is described in accord with the stereotype and perceived dispersion refers to the extent to which group members are perceived as dispersed around their mean. Perceived group variability has consequences both for judgment and behavior toward group members. The more a group is perceived as homogeneous the more likely it is that stereotypes will be applied to its members and the more likely it is that they are treated as alike.

Research on perceived group variability reveals that normally we perceive outgroups in a less differentiated way than ingroups (the outgroup homogeneity effect; for reviews see Devos, Comby, & Deschamps, 1996; Park & Judd, 1990; Quattrone, 1986). However, minority (Simon & Brown, 1987; Simon & Pettigrew, 1990), low status (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Lorenzi-Cioldi, Stewart, & Eagly, 1995) and outcome dependent

perceivers (Guinote, 2001; Guinote & Fiske, 1999) perceive more variability of the outgroup than the ingroup. Several explanations have been proposed to the reversal of the outgroup homogeneity effect by minority group members. One explanation points out that this reversal is linked to the consequences of group size and outcome dependency for control deprivation (Guinote, 2001; Guinote, Brown, & Fiske, 2000; Guinote & Fiske, 1999). More specifically, minority and dependent group members lack control over outcomes, which leads to increased information seeking and perceived group variability. Support for the mediating role of perceived control and information seeking was found in a study manipulating group size (Guinote, Brown, & Fiske, 2000). In addition, it was found that when outgroup members control important outcomes, outcome dependency leads to increased perception of variability of the outgroup (Guinote & Fiske, 1999, study 1) as well as to the reverse of the outgroup homogeneity effect, that is to perceiving more variability of the outgroup than the ingroup (Guinote, 2001; Guinote & Fiske, 1999, study 2; Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, in press).

The present article extends these finds to focus on individual differences in perceived control. It is hypothesized that individual differences in perceived control are associated with differences in group perception. More specifically, because lack of control leads to more effortful information seeking and information affects perceived group variability (Fiedler, Kimmelmeier, & Freitag, 1999; Linville et al., 1989) participants who perceive less control over their own life are expected to perceive a newly encountered group as less stereotypic and more variable than participants who feel in control. This hypothesis is also in line with results from studies focusing on dispositional variables that affect information seeking. For instance, high need for closure leads to stereotypic perceptions of groups (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983); need for cognition leads to less stereotypic perceptions (Crawford & Skowronski, 1998); high cognitive complexity leads to higher perceived ingroup and outgroup variability (Ben-Ari, Kedem, & Levy-Weiner, 1992), and high need for structure leads to more homogeneous perceptions of groups if the perceivers display the ability to fulfil their epistemic needs (Bar-Tal & Guinote, in press).

The following study was conducted to test the hypotheses presented above.

## 1. METHOD

### 1.1. *Participants and design*

Thirty-two undergraduate students (17 females and 15 males) of the University of Colorado received credit for participation. The study was a one factorial design with perceived control (low vs. high) as a between subjects variable.

### 1.2. *Stimulus material*

The stimulus material of this study consisted both of abstract level and exemplar information of a group of one-hundred lawyers who work for a firm<sup>1</sup>. A general description of the group of lawyers was allegedly provided by two people who knew the lawyers very well. This information described the lawyers in this firm to be politically conservative, overweight and religious. For instance, one comment was:

While lawyers in this firm aren't all alike, there is a certain style that seems to be particularly rewarded or sought out by the firm. In general I would say that most of them are fairly conservative politically. They tend to be outgoing and sociable, enjoying good food and talk. Perhaps as a result, they maybe don't get as much exercise as they should. A number of them have had health problems over the years. Finally, they tend to be rather religious and committed to religious values. They are a conscientious and highly motivated group of lawyers.

The exemplar information consisted of descriptions of nine lawyers. Each lawyer was presented in a separate sheet containing a picture and three sentences. Two sets of the same mate-

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<sup>1</sup> The material used in this study was the same as in Guinote and Judd (2000).

rial were built, so that the association between picture and description was counterbalanced in two sets. Variability of the exemplar information was provided by describing the lawyers as fitting into one of three different subgroups. Each subgroup was made up of three lawyers and was characterized by two consistent and one inconsistent attribute: Three lawyers supported Republicans, enjoyed having dinner and drinks with friends and were atheists. Three other lawyers supported the Democratic Party, were overweight and were Catholic. Three other lawyers did not agree with the actual tax policy, exercised regularly and had a religious personal faith. For instance, one exemplar was:

Donald  
Had voted Republican in every presidential election for the past twenty years.  
Loved to have friends over, grill steaks, and have a few drinks.  
Told his mother not to talk to his kids about God.

Each exemplar of one subgroup was followed by an exemplar of another subgroup and the order of presentation was held constant across participants.

### 1.3. Procedure

Participants took part in the study in sessions of 3 to 6 participants. The study was introduced to participants as focusing on how people form impressions of groups. Participants were told that they would learn about a group of 100 lawyers who work for a firm. As in many firms, over the years this law firm has acquired a reputation for hiring and promoting certain kinds of people. The researchers allegedly gathered information from two different people who knew the lawyers in this firm well, asking each one what their general impressions of the lawyers in this firm is. Participants were then presented with the comments that these two people made about the lawyers in this firm.

After reading the group level information participants were presented with additional information about nine lawyers who allegedly were randomly selected from the 100 lawyers who worked for the firm. Allegedly these lawyers were asked to give us three or four things they had

done in the past few days or things that describe how they were like.

Participants took as long as they needed to read the information about the nine lawyers. After reading the information, participants answered a questionnaire with questions of group perception and perceived control.

### 1.4. Dependent measures

*General similarity.* Participants rated how similar the 100 lawyers that worked for the firm were to each other. Ratings were given in a nine-point scale ranging from *not at all similar* to *very similar*.

*Similarity on attributes.* In this task, participants rated how similar the 100 lawyers were to each other in terms of their political attitudes, their health and exercise habits, and their religious beliefs. Ratings were made in three separate nine-point scales, ranging from *not at all similar* to *very similar*.

*Percentage estimate.* Participants estimated the percentage of lawyers who worked for the firm that endorsed each one of the following traits: *supports Republican candidates, is overweighted, supports Democratic candidates, exercises a lot, goes to church regularly, is very religious, has an unhealthy lifestyle, is politically conservative, says they don't have strong religious beliefs, is politically liberal, opposes religious education, is careful about his health.*

*Histogram.* In this task, participants drew a histogram indicating how many lawyers were located in each level of a five-point scale. They completed this task separately for the three traits used to define the group (conservative, unhealthy and religious).

*Perceived control.* Participants answered the sense of control scale (Mirowsky & Ross, 1991), which consists of 8 items that aim to assess a person's perception of control over one's life. In this scale participants indicated the extent to which they agree with sentences like: *There is no sense planning a lot – if something good is going to happen, it will; The real good things that happen to me are mostly luck; I can do just about anything I really set my mind to.* Answers were given in five-point scales.

## 2. RESULTS

Because no effects of gender or picture were found the data was collapsed across these variables. The means of the dependent measures are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
*Group perception as a function of perceived control*

Measures:	Low	High
General similarity	6.57	7.36
Similarity on the attributes	6.57	7.55
Percentage estimate	39.59	63.76
Variance	1.29	.93

Values refer to cell means. Higher values mean higher perceived similarity (general similarity and similarity on the attributes), higher stereotypicality (percentage estimate) and higher perceived dispersion of group members (variance).

*Perceived control:* For each participant a score of perceived control was computed by adding the values of the sense of control scale, after recoding reversed items. A median split separated the participants that perceived low and high control over their life.

*General similarity:* A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to analyze the effect of perceived control on perceived general similarity of the overall group of 100 lawyers. A marginal effect of perceived control emerged,  $F(1,28) = 2.7, p < .09$ . Participants that had a low sense of control over their life perceived the group as less similar ( $M = 6.57$ ) than participants that perceived high control ( $M = 7.36$ ).

*Similarity on the attributes:* One score was computed by averaging the similarity ratings of the three attributes. A one way analysis of variance on this score revealed a simple effect of perceived control,  $F(1,28) = 7.4, p < .01$ . Partici-

pants that perceived less control perceived the group as less similar ( $M = 6.57$ ) than participants that felt in control ( $M = 7.55$ ). This result is in accord with the hypothesis that lack of control leads to increased perceived group variability.

*Percentage estimate:* One measure was computed by subtracting the percentage estimate on counter-stereotypic attributes from the percentage estimate on stereotypic attributes (Park & Judd, 1990). A one way analysis of variance on this measure revealed a simple effect of perceived control,  $F(1, 28) = 6.25, p < .05$ . Low control participants perceived the group as less stereotypic ( $M = 39.59$ ) than high control participants ( $M = 63.76$ ).

*Perceived variance:* From the histogram task the perceived variance of the group was computed. A one-way analysis of variance on this measure yield a marginal effect of perceived control.  $F(1,28) = 3.77, p = .06$ . Participants that perceived low control tended to describe the group as more dispersed ( $M = 1.29$ ) than participants that felt in control ( $M = .93$ ).

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

One study was conducted to analyze the effect of individual differences in perceived control on group perception. Based on the finding that lack of control leads to effortful information seeking (e.g. Pittman & Pittman, 1980; Weary et al., 1993) and that an increase in information increases perceived group variability (Fiedler et al., 1999; Linville et al., 1989) it was hypothesized that lack of control leads to more variable and less stereotypic perceptions of groups. This hypothesis received support: Participants who perceived less control over their lives perceived a newly encountered group as more variable, as more dispersed and as endorsing less stereotypic attributes than perceivers who perceived more control over their lives.

Past research showed that perceived control affects self-perception, objective group variability (Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, in press), the amount of attributional analyses of events (e.g. Pittman & Pittman, 1980) and attention to information of others (Erber & Fiske, 1984; Fiske & Dépret, 1996). In addition, perceived control also affects group perception. More specifically,

lack of control leads to increased perception of outgroup variability and the reversal of the outgroup homogeneity effect. That is, people normally perceive outgroups in a less differentiated and complex way than ingroups (the outgroup homogeneity effect). However, lack of control triggered by group size (Guinote, Brown, & Fiske, 2000) or outcome dependency (Guinote & Fiske, 1999; Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, in press) leads perceivers to develop higher perceived variability of the outgroup than the ingroup.

The current results extend these findings pointing out that perceived control addressed at an inter-individual level also operates in the same direction. They support the perspective that group perception – including outgroup perception – is highly malleable and that the needs of the perceiver are an important determinant of it. These results are in line with other results showing that individual differences that affect information seeking also affect group perception (e.g. Bar-Tal & Guinote, in press; Crawford & Skowronski, 1998; Kruglanski & Freund, 1983).

Considering that perceived group variability affects behavior toward group members and the use of stereotypes when judging individuals, these results suggest that the more a person feels in control the more he or she will discriminate against outgroup members. The consequences of perceived control for judgment and behavior toward individual group members is a topic that future research should address.

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## ABSTRACT

One study was conducted to analyze the effect of perceived control over one's life on group perception. Participants were presented with abstract and exemplar information regarding a group of 100 lawyers and answered a questionnaire with questions regarding group perception and perceived control. Considering that lack of control leads to effortful information seeking, it was expected, and found that participants who perceived less control over their lives perceived the group of lawyers in a less stereotypic and more variable way than participants who perceived more control over their lives. This result is in line with results showing that lack of control leads to increased perceived group variability. The role of motivation on group perception is discussed.

*Key words:* Control deprivation, perceived group variability, stereotypes, individual differences.

## RESUMO

O efeito da percepção do controlo sobre a sua vida na percepção de grupo é analisado num estudo. Neste estudo, os participantes recebem informação abstracta e exemplar acerca de um grupo de 100 advogados, após o que respondem a um questionário com medidas de percepção de grupo e percepção de controlo. Considerando que a falta de controlo está associada a um processamento de informação vigilante, esperávamos que pessoas que percebem menos controlo sobre a sua vida percebam o grupo de advogados de forma menos estereotípica e mais variável que pessoas que percebem mais controlo sobre a sua vida. Os resultados confirmam esta hipótese, indo ao encontro de estudos prévios, segundo os quais falta de controlo tem como consequência um aumento da percepção de variabilidade de grupo. É discutido o papel de variáveis motivacionais na percepção de grupo.

*Palavras-chave:* Privação de controlo, percepção de variabilidade de grupo, estereótipos, diferenças individuais.