How perceptions of one's organization can affect perceptions of the self: Membership in a stable organization can sustain individuals' sense of control

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ARTICLE INFO
Handling editor: Aarti Iyer
Keywords:
Perceived control
Efficacy
Organizational stability
Group identification

ABSTRACT
Building on contemporary perspectives regarding the role that group identification can play in sustaining control motives, we propose that being a member of a stable organization—one experienced as predictable and consistent rather than changing and in flux—can maintain individuals' sense of control. Four studies test this prediction. We observe that higher social identification as an organizational member (as compared to lower identification) is associated with an increased generalized sense of personal efficacy in life specifically when one's organization is experienced as relatively stable (Study 1 and Study 2). Further, the perceived stability of one's organization moderates the extent to which those who recently experienced a threat to personal control—and are thereby motivated to reestablish feelings of control—seek increased social identification as an organizational member (Study 3 and Study 4). Results suggest that membership in a stable organization can provide a psychological buffer against threats to personal control encountered in daily life outside work. Contributions to understanding the ways in which people maintain feelings of personal control in the social world are discussed.

1. Introduction
Understanding how people manage to maintain a subjective sense of control in an unpredictable world is a question receiving increasing attention within the field of social psychology (cf. Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). People generally want to feel that they possess control over their environment (Langer, 1975). Individuals' subjective sense that they possess personal agency—that is, that they can control their environment and have the capacity to act efficaciously and achieve desired outcomes—is associated with a host of positive psychological and behavioral outcomes (Kelly, 1955; Seligman, 1975, 1976; Skinner, 1995). Conversely, reduced feelings of personal control have been shown to be psychologically aversive (Pennebaker & Stone, 2004). Importantly, people have been shown to respond to deficits in perceived personal control by seeking to restore a subjective sense of control (for a recent review, see Landau et al., 2015). Here, by building both theoretically and empirically on recent perspectives on control restoration, we suggest that there are nuanced ways to think about how membership in particular kinds of social groups may help individuals maintain a subjective sense of control in life more generally.

Consider Dan—Dan works at a company that he would describe as steady and predictable. In contrast to some of the organizations that Dan's friends work at, which seem in a perpetual state of change and flux, Dan's company has an air of permanence and consistency—it is experienced by its employees as highly stable. In the current research, we suggest that membership in such an organization—one perceived as possessing a high degree of stability—can help individuals maintain a subjective feeling of efficacy and control in their lives more generally. Specifically, we propose that being a member of a stable organization, or, precisely, thinking of oneself in terms of one's membership in a stable organization, provides an effective means of (re)-establishing a sense of personal control.

Our research makes two key contributions. First, we build on theory on social group membership as a source of control (e.g., Fritsche et al., 2013; Greenaway et al., 2015) by introducing a novel factor—perceptions of group stability—that we suggest may be crucial in determining whether membership in a given group may enhance its members' subjective sense of personal agency in life. Second, we provide novel evidence that control motives underlie group identification processes, thus empirically testing a central proposition put forth by the group-based
model of control restoration (Fritsche et al., 2013; Fritsche, Jonas, & Fankhänel, 2008). We expand on both of these below.

1.1. Control restoration through group identification

According to Fritsche et al.'s (2008, 2013) group-based model of control restoration, when feelings of personal control are threatened—for instance, when people find themselves in situations where they lack control, or are reminded of the ways in which the world is uncontrollable—individuals may seek to re-establish their subjective sense that they personally possess agency in the world by identifying as a part of a collective. The group-based model of control restoration (Fritsche et al., 2008, 2013, 2017) draws on theories of social identity to propose why group identification may be an effective means of achieving a sense of efficacy and control. According to social identity theorists, a central part of an individual’s self-concept derives from his or her membership in social groups, and individuals come to understand themselves through these group memberships. Thus, characteristics of the in-group may come to be seen as characteristics of the self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Compared to the individual acting alone, groups are powerful social agents. Individuals working together as a collective constitute an especially effective means of achieving goals and acting consequentially in the world. Thus, an important attribute of groups is that they can be highly efficacious—groups have the ability to control their external environment and thus exert influence in the world. Therefore, from a group-based control restoration perspective, membership in a social group might not only assist individuals in achieving group-based goals (Epley, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000), but incorporating group attributes into one’s sense of self may help individuals maintain a sense that they personally are someone who is in control and efficacious That is, “...the sense of agency derived from social identification is not experienced solely at a group level...[r]ather, drawing on the social identity view of “the social self”, “...individuals can derive feelings of control from group memberships and incorporate these into their self-concept (Greenaway et al., 2015, pg. 4). Experiencing a sense that one is a person who can control their environment is a necessary precursor to believing that one can act efficaciously in the world, achieving one’s desired goals.

Two lines of research have emerged which provide evidence consistent with the group-based model of control restoration. In one line of research, Greenaway et al. (2015) have shown that social identification with groups may enhance individuals’ feelings of personal control. For example, the authors find that U.S. participants made to feel highly identified as an American reported higher feelings of control in their lives compared to U.S. participants made to feel less social identification as an American. Greenaway et al. (2015) also show that high identification with a social group can diminish the negative effects of control threats on feelings of personal control—suggesting that group identification itself may be a source of control.

In another line of research, Fritsche et al. (2013) have demonstrated that threats to personal control increase ethnocentrism and similar actions presumed to bolster cultural in-group esteem. For example, in a sample of Austrians, Germans, and Croations, when individuals who were highly identified as a member of their national in-group were made to think of aspects of their life in which they lacked power and influence (the control threat manipulation used in this study), they subsequently demonstrated greater in-group bias by rating their own national in-group more favorably on a series of positive traits relative to outgroups (Fritsche et al., 2013). In related work, Stollberg, Fritsche, and Bäcker (2015) find that control threats increase the attractiveness (i.e., participants’ interest in joining) goal-oriented groups. Together, these findings indicate that reduced personal control may trigger individuals’ attraction to, and desire to reinforce the power and esteem of, control-affording ingroups. Furthermore, in demonstrating increased attractiveness of groups and an enhanced tendency to bolster in-group esteem, these findings also indirectly suggest that social identification processes may be at play in response to control threat.

This approach has provided important evidence that individuals may turn to their in-groups (and seek to bolster them) in response to threats to their feelings of personal control. However, by focusing on group attraction and in-group bolstering in response to control threats, this approach has not been able to distinguish psychological attempts at control restoration through the process of identifying the self as an in-group member—a central tenet of the group-based model of control—from attempts at control restoration through other compensatory mechanisms, such as outsourcing control to social entities external to the self (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). It is worth noting that in Stollberg et al.’s (2015) work on the effects of control threat on attractiveness of goal-oriented groups, the authors present one study wherein they measure identification as a proxy for attractiveness and demonstrate that control threats increase identification with task groups, but not other types of groups such as intimacy groups or loose associations. This study presents the first evidence that control threats may increase social identification with certain types of groups.

In the current research, we build on this initial finding and Fritsche et al.’s (2013) body of work on the effects of control threat on in-group bias and support, by developing and testing a priori hypotheses that directly examine, across four studies, whether the process of social identification itself—that is, the tendency to construe the self in terms of social group membership—is a means by which individuals may re-establish their sense of personal control. We employ two novel empirical approaches to do so. We assess whether increased identification with a (stable) organization can lead to increased feelings of personal control. We also assess whether threatening individuals’ own subjective sense of control—thus triggering their motivation to re-establish a sense of control—may increase their tendency to define the self in terms of group membership.

Second, we build on past theory by positing the importance of a moderator. Specifically, we empirically examine whether a characteristic that has been theorized to be related to control—perceived stability—might moderate this group identification process. That is, we examine whether perceptions of how predictable and unchanging a group seems might moderate the extent to which individuals seek to restore their sense of control—specifically, their personal sense of efficacy in life—through group membership. In doing so, we extend the group-based model of control restoration (Fritsche et al., 2013) and build on Greenaway et al.’s (2015) findings by suggesting the particular kinds of social groups (e.g., those experienced as relatively stable) that are most likely to serve a control-restoring or control-enhancing function for their members. We assess our predictions in the context of employees and their work organizations—a particular context in which the group-based model of control has yet to be tested and one especially useful in examining our proposed moderator of group stability.

1.2. From group stability to a personal sense of efficacy

Identifying as a group member as a means of control restoration may be most effective when the group itself is characterized by unified agency—that is, when the group is experienced as a collection of individuals working together in a goal-directed manner (Fritsche et al., 2013; Fritsche, Jonas, & Kessler, 2011; Stollberg et al., 2015). We suggest that a certain level of perceived group stability is likely necessary in order to experience a sense of being part of an efficacious collective. If a group is unpredictable or constantly changing, it is unlikely to be perceived as having a sustained goal, thus making it difficult for individuals to achieve a shared sense of agency through group membership. We thus propose that perceived group stability might be a key factor influencing whether individuals derive a sense of personal control through group identification. We expand on this reasoning below.
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