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“YES, I DECIDE YOU WILL RECEIVE YOUR CHOICE”: EFFECTS OF AUTHORITATIVE AGREEMENT ON PERCEPTIONS OF CONTROL

Kaitlyn Gillard
Kenneth M. Cramer
University of Windsor

ABSTRACT

Research suggests that control, choice, and prediction play independent roles in one's perception of control. Extending the control model to include a relational context, we conducted a partial replication to investigate the impact of authoritative opinion on control-related perceptions. An experiment partially supported our hypotheses. Participants with control and choice perceived higher control than participants with neither choice nor control; whereas participants with experimenter agreement experienced higher control-related perceptions than participants with neither choice nor control. Participants with experimenter disagreement did not perceive more control than participants without choice or control despite the literature on control by proxy. Implications for the study of relinquishment of control are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Most people would rather have a choice between two different items than no choice at all. The preference for choice and control may stem from its association with self-esteem (Scarpa & Luscher, 2002), stress relief (Langer, Janis, & Wolfer, 1975), or even minimized learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Despite the many benefits of feeling control, the conditions required to feel control are debated (Rodin, 1990). Whereas traditionalists believe predication is necessary to have control (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Seligman, 1975); others argue choice, control, and prediction play independent roles (Cramer, Nickels, & Gural, 1997; Langlois, Cramer, & Mohagen, 2002). The present study utilizes the latter theory with the implementation of authoritative figures. As a result, it extends current theory on the illusory or actual forfeiture of control and choice, and its impact on control-related perceptions.

Control/Choice Confound

Previous studies (for a review see: Nickels, Cramer, & Gural, 1992; Cramer & Perreault, 2006) remedied the confound between prediction and control, while creating a new confound between

choice and control. Namely, did participants feel more control because they made a choice or because the options provided different, yet unknown, outcomes (control)? Langlois et al. (2002) designed two experiments to separate choice from control. In the first experiment, participants were told they would edit papers for either 2 or 20 minutes. Those randomly assigned to choose an envelope made their own decision between two envelopes, whereas the experimenter's coin flip determined the envelope for participants without choice. Control was available when the envelopes contained different time periods (i.e., 2 vs. 20 minutes), but not available when the envelopes contained identical time periods (i.e., both contained 2 minutes, or both contained 20 minutes). Therefore, the three groups of choice/control, choice/no-control and no-choice/no-control were measured for control-related perceptions. Results showed participants must make a meaningful choice between different options to produce greater perceptions of control. These results were supported in the second experiment. A follow-up study (Cramer & Gates, 2010) confirmed the results, in addition to the unique finding of an illusion of control in the group who made a choice between two identical outcomes (choice/no-control). Cramer and Gates (2010) uncovering of illusory control aligns with Langer's (1975) second experiment that people will feel more control when solely given choice, even with identical outcomes.

Illusion of Choice and Control

The present study is an extended replication of Langlois et al. (2002) with the inclusion of a relational context. The purpose of this study is to explore the untapped cell of no-choice/control that was created when separating the independent effects of choice, control, and prediction. Specifically it asks how authority's agreement or disagreement with one's choice (thereby creating an illusion of choice or no-choice condition) will affect one's perception of control. In other words, do participants feel more control by giving their opinion between choices, and does this vary as to whether another more powerful agent agrees or disagrees? Little psychological research exists on the illusion of choice, and those that have are in the context of childbirth (Crossley, 2007; Shaw, 2007; Stockill, 2007). If choice is defined as making a selection between two or more options, then an illusion of choice would involve thinking one was making a selection while the choice was made by someone else.

In the absence of research on illusory choice, there has been a plentitude of work on conformity. Conformity is important to this study because of the experimenter's role as ally or opponent. Asch (1956) presented participants with lines of varying length while in a group of confederates, and compared participants' judgements of length when there was no pressure to conform and when the group gave erroneous answers. Results showed the majority of participants conformed to at least one incorrect judgement of line length, whereas subjects in the control group gave mostly correct answers. Participants conformed for either group acceptance (normative influence) or belief that the group was more likely to be correct (informational influence). A meta-analysis of Asch-type conformity studies uncovered informational influence to be stronger when participants responded in private and interacted with the group indirectly (Bond, 2005). The present study may include informational conformity in the illusory choice conditions due to the experimenters' interjections.

Similarly, Wohl and Enzle (2009) found an illusion of control by proxy. Three experiments showed participants were more likely to renounce control to a partner perceived as luckier. In the

third study, the choice to relinquish control and choice yielded increased feelings of control. This effect has also been found for decisions involving actual skill, such as in medicine (Miller, 1998). Thus, participants with illusory choice may still perceive control because of the experimenter's competence. A limitation of the research on the illusion of control by proxy is that the participants may be feeling increased perceptions of control as a result of their choice to relinquish control. The present study addresses this limitation by randomly assigning participants to illusion of choice conditions.

The Present Study

Based on findings by Cramer and Gates (2010), Cramer and Perreault (2006), and Langlois et al. (2002), it was hypothesized (1) participants in the Control-Choice condition would have higher ratings of perceived control, responsibility, and influence, and lower ratings of helplessness than individuals without Choice and Control. Based on findings by Wohl and Enzle (2009) and conformity studies, it was hypothesized (2) participants in the Experimenter and/or Researcher Agreement conditions would have higher ratings of control-related variables than individuals in the No Control-No Choice condition; and that (3) participants in the Experimenter and/or Researcher Disagreement conditions would report relatively higher control-related perceptions than participants in the No Control-No Choice group. Participants in the Experimenter and/or Researcher Agreement conditions were expected to perceive higher control than participants in the Experimenter and/or Researcher Disagreement as a result of increased conformity.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and twenty undergraduates from a mid-sized Canadian university (97 females and 24 males) participated for partial course credit. The mean age was 20.8 years. The sample consisted of 71 Caucasians, 16 African Americans, 15 Asians, 9 Middle Easterners, and 9 participants of mixed or other ancestry.

Materials

Two envelopes with "LEFT" printed on one and "RIGHT" printed on the other were placed in front of the participant. Medium sized signs (8.5 x 11 inch) were used to provide control- and choice- information to participants. Signs providing control information read either: "These envelopes contain the SAME time period" or "These envelopes contain DIFFERENT time periods" (Times New Roman font size 93). Signs indicating choice information read either: "Your time period MAY be determined by the envelope YOU select" or "Your time period will be determined by the envelope selected from an experimenter-flipped coin." Appropriate signs were displayed in the room with the participant, and the experimenter ensured participants read and understood them.

A one-dollar coin with the words "LEFT" and "RIGHT" affixed to either side was used. A page of nonsensical letters was visible on top of a stack of papers, with worn pencils and erasers scattered on the table in front of the participant.

Design and Procedure

Participants were tested individually in a private room. Participants arrived under the impression that the study was designed to investigate personality and proofreading accuracy. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions ($n = 15$ in each): No Control-No Choice, Control-Choice, Experimenter Agreement, Experimenter Disagreement, Experimenter Agreement-Researcher Agreement, Experimenter Agreement-Researcher Disagreement, Experimenter Disagreement-Researcher Agreement, or Experimenter-Researcher Disagreement. Each condition involved a selection between two envelopes, and participants were told they would proofread papers for the amount of time indicated in the chosen envelope (either 2 or 20 minutes). In these conditions, participants with control over the outcome were presented with envelopes containing different time periods; whereas participants with no control were presented with envelopes containing identical time periods (both containing 2 minutes or both containing 20 minutes). For all conditions, participants were deliberately not told what time period they received to keep prediction constant at no-prediction. Participants with choice selected an envelope themselves, whereas participants with no-choice had the envelope selected for them by an experimenter's coin-flip. Furthermore, participants in the illusion of choice conditions gave an initial choice, but had the ultimate choice decided by the experimenter or researcher.

Participants in the No Control-No Choice condition were told that both envelopes contained the same time period but the selection was determined by the experimenter's coin flip. Participants in the remaining conditions chose between two envelopes containing 2 and 20 minute time cards - without knowing which envelope contained which time period. Participants in the Control-Choice condition received their envelope choice with no opinion given by the experimenter. In the Experimenter Agreement condition, participants received their choice as confirmed by the experimenter. In the Experimenter Agreement-Researcher Agreement condition, participants received their choice as confirmed by the experimenter and then the researcher. This is in contrast to the Experimenter Disagreement condition where participants made a choice of envelopes, but the experimenter decided the participant would edit for the amount of time in the opposite envelope. In the Experimenter Disagreement-Researcher Agreement condition, participants made a choice, the experimenter disagreed and switched the choice, and the researcher agreed with the experimenter's choice. The final two conditions are a combination of authoritative agreement and disagreement. In the Experimenter Agreement-Researcher Disagreement condition, participants made a choice initially approved by the experimenter, but the researcher disagreed and decided the participant will receive the opposite envelope. Participants in the Experimenter Disagreement-Researcher Disagreement condition made a choice initially not approved by the experimenter and assigned the opposite envelope, but the researcher ultimately disagrees with the experimenter and decides the participant will receive the originally selected envelope.

After experimental manipulations and prior to opening envelopes, participants completed a measure of control-related perceptions. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'not at all', 5 = 'to a great extent'), participants rated the extent to which they perceived control, responsibility, influence, and helplessness over what time period they would receive. This questionnaire also included manipulation checks to assess participants' knowledge of their control, choice, and

agreement in their given experimental group. One final check measured the amount of desire participants had to proofread for the short (2- minute) time period. The entire study took approximately 30 minutes. After the experiment was completed, participants were debriefed by the researcher and informed they would not be proofreading any papers.

RESULTS

Perceptions of control-related variables were measured across eight groups which differed according to levels of control, choice, and experimenter or researcher influence. The moderate intercorrelation of the control-related dependent variables (see Appendix A) warranted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with significance set at .05. The MANOVA confirmed there were significant differences in the control-associated dependent measures among the 8 control and choice groups: $\lambda=.631$, $F(28,394)=1.92$, $p=.004$, partial eta squared=.109. Given the significance of the overall test, follow-up analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for each control-related dependent variable. Significant univariate main effects for control and choice groups were obtained for perceptions of control: $F(7,112)=3.15$, $p=.004$; responsibility: $F(7,112)=3.28$, $p=.003$; influence: $F(7,112)=2.34$, $p=.029$; and helplessness: $F(7,112)=2.19$, $p=.040$.

There was a minor violation in variance homogeneity for control, responsibility, and helplessness scores, but both Brown-Forsythe F and Welch's F adjustments showed this did not impact the overall statistical outcome. Games-Howell post hoc tests demonstrated participants with no choice and no control perceived less control than participants with choice and control ($p=.016$). Participants with no choice and no control perceived significantly less responsibility than participants with choice and control ($p=.010$) and participants with experimenter agreement ($p=.021$). Participants with no choice and no control perceived significantly less influence than participants with experimenter agreement ($p=.040$). Furthermore, participants with no choice and no control reported significantly more helplessness than participants with experimenter agreement ($p=.015$) and participants with both experimenter and researcher agreement ($p=.006$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study partially satisfied the hypotheses. The first hypothesis that participants with both control and choice would experience more control-related perceptions than those with neither control nor choice was supported for perceptions of control and responsibility, but not for influence and helplessness. This mild departure from past research on control and choice (Cramer & Gates, 2010; Cramer & Perreault, 2006; Langlois et al., 2002) still replicates the fundamental aspect that those with control and choice perceive more control than those without control and choice.

The second and third hypothesis addressed the significant theoretical extension of illusory choice and control by proxy. Participants with experimenter agreement perceived more responsibility, influence and less helplessness than participants with neither choice nor control. Participants with experimenter and researcher agreement experienced less helplessness than those with neither control nor choice. The increase of control-related perceptions satisfies the second

hypothesis, but it is noteworthy that there were no specific increases to control. The discrepancy shows how the control-related variables of perceived control, influence, responsibility, and lack of helplessness are not created equal. Therefore, participants experienced more control-related perceptions when their choice was ultimately agreed with, but perceived most control with sole input for the outcome.

The increased perception of control-related variables when participants' choices were affirmed show a similar finding to Asch's (1956) conformity effect. Instead of group conformity among people of equal rank, the present study shows how groups of hierarchical dynamics also experience increased control-related perceptions when confronted with an ally. Respondents high in Desire for Control have been shown less likely to conform in an Asch conformity model (Burger, 1987). Although Langlois et al. (2002) found no support of Desire for Control as a covariate when isolating the effects of choice, control, and predication; Desire for Control may be a promising covariate in additional studies of authoritative agreement.

Additional research is needed to support the current findings on forfeiture of control. Wohl and Enzle (2009) showed participants are likely to forfeit control to someone perceived as more capable (i.e. lucky). Their third study demonstrated participants reported more control after relinquishing control to the luckier proxy than those who did not relinquish control to the proxy. Our third hypothesis testing these findings was not supported. Instead, the present study found increased control-related perceptions only when the proxy was in agreement with the participant's choice, when compared to participants with no choice or control. Therefore, the authors assert that a controller does not relinquish control-related feelings when forfeiting control to someone else on the condition that the proxy acts in accordance with the controller's wishes. Once the other person ceases to follow the controller's wishes, as in the experimenter disagreement conditions, control has been lost.

On a related note, increased perceptions of responsibility and lack of helplessness during experimenter agreement may be due to participants' perceptions that the experimenter is an expert or has secret knowledge about the envelopes. Future research can see if the control by proxy effect withstands agreement of a perceived dummy if the dummy acts in accordance with the controller's wishes. Similarly, the present study is limited by its confounding of status and power. The effects of authoritative agreement may be a result of the researcher's influence as a symbol of status or of the researcher's coercion through use of power. Future research is needed to assess participants' perceptions of the experimenter's and researcher's status and power in relation to each other and themselves.

Implications speak to those with authority. For example, if parents want their child to perceive more responsibility and influence, and less helplessness, it is best to ask the child to make a choice between two different outcomes and approve their decision than to randomly decide between two common outcomes. In the case that parents want their child to perceive more control, it is better to give the child a choice between two different outcomes without the parents affecting the outcome. The present study does not support providing an illusion of choice when parents' have already decided upon an outcome. Further applications include therapy, education, and medical treatment. Ultimately, persons in positions of authority should provide meaningfully

different options to their subordinates. Then depending if the superior wants others to feel control or control-related perceptions, the superior can silently or verbally consent, respectively.

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APPENDIX A

Intercorrelations of Dependent Measures

Measure	1	2	3	4	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Control	-				2.00	1.27
2. Responsibility	.500**	-			2.13	1.26
3. Influence	.500**	.517**	-		1.94	1.19
4. Lack of Helplessness	.447**	.307**	.195*	-	2.76	1.39

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Dependent Measures scale ranged from 1 to 5.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kaitlyn Gillard graduated from University of Windsor with an honours degree in english and psychology. This paper presents the results of her honours thesis. Email: gillardk@uwindsor.ca

Kenneth Cramer is a full tenured professor and 3M teaching fellow at University of Windsor. He divides his research time between issues in higher education and personality/social psychology. Email: kcramer@uwindsor.ca