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# Perceived Control and Adjustment: A Comparison of Bereavement and Relationship Dissolution

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Perceived Control and Adjustment: A Comparison of Bereavement and Relationship Dissolution

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## Abstract

The current study investigates the relationship between perceived control and adjustment across a comparison of two events; bereavement ( $n = 83$ ) and relationship dissolution ( $n = 75$ ). These events occurred in the six months prior to the study. Perceived control was assessed in terms of personal control, control of other forces, and control of a higher power, and how much control each had over the loss experienced. Adjustment was assessed in terms of current symptoms of distress (i.e., intrusion and avoidance), stress-related growth, positive states of mind, and life satisfaction. The relations between perceived control and adjustment differed across the types of control and the events. Personal control was negatively associated with adjustment scores in the bereavement sample, control of other forces was negatively associated with adjustment scores across the measure in the bereavement samples, and control of a higher power was positively associated with adjustment in the relationship dissolution group. Implications and limitation are discussed.

Loss is an experience that everyone goes through in one degree or another at various points in his or her life. There are many different types of loss and many events that can qualify as loss. Harvey (1996) defines a major loss as “as reduction in resources, whether tangible or intangible, in which a person has a significant emotional investment”. In order for an event to be classified as a loss, there must be more than the subjective experience of the individual that he or she has experienced a major loss. There must be objective agreement by knowledgeable others that such an event has occurred, such as divorce or death. Others must also recognize this loss as substantial and legitimate for it to qualify as a major loss (Harvey, 1998)

According to Harvey (1998), there are commonalities across and among diverse loss experiences. The individual or individuals whom are directly involved must perceive that the loss has occurred, and there must be a reduction in resources that are physical, psychological, or symbolic. These elements can be seen in various experiences of loss, including the death of close others and the divorce and dissolution of close relationships, as well as in other losses such as victimization, loss of home, etc. Other similarities in the overall experience of loss are the arrays of emotional experience (e.g. regret, guilt) felt by individuals suffering from these losses. There are also obvious differences in the types of loss experienced, that can contribute to different grieving patterns, such as death as a permanent and irreversible loss, comparing divorce after fifty years of marriage to divorce after five years of marriage, as well as the dissolution of non-married relationship compared to married relationships.

Negative life events, including loss, play a role in many psychiatric disorders, such as depression, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders; therefore, we have a vested interest in looking into how these negative effects can be buffered. Many studies have looked at control, and have found control to be an important factor in coping with loss (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Negative

life events that are perceived as uncontrollable tend to be more distressing, and have been found to more likely lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder than events perceived as controllable (Foa et. Al., 1992, Fiske & Taylor, 1984) It is important to note that negative life events perceived as uncontrollable have typically been hypothesized to be more distressing in comparison to those perceived as controllable, this is not always found to be true. There are many variables that contribute to whether control is beneficial or disadvantageous to an individual's coping. For example, if having control is contrary to an individual's preferred coping style, distress can occur. The potential for control can also generate distress because of the cost involved, e.g. a cancer patient who chooses to take control and treat the disease using chemotherapy can experience a cost to their physiological health as well as the other adverse effects of chemotherapy (Folkman, 1984). This can also apply to medical care where a choice is made to treat with a treatment with unknown results or side effects. Control can also have negative social consequences when someone has the ability to exercise control, but doing so may result in an embarrassing social situation. For example, if a child is acting out in public, the parent has the option to exercise control and chastise the child, however may choose not to due to the spectacle it could cause (Folkman, 1984 & Dill et al., 1980).

This departure from what researchers originally hypothesized about control demonstrates the idea of appraising controllability on a situational basis, in order to avoid the distress of trying to control an uncontrollable situation. Folkman (1984) suggests that a person must initially determine the meaning of an event via primary and secondary cognitive appraisal processes. Primary appraisal of the situation involves evaluating the significance of a specific event with regard to the individual's own well-being, and secondary appraisal involves evaluating the coping strategies available to the person as well as the demands of the situation. These appraisals

can help an individual determine the controllability of a situation and whether it is best and appropriate to perceive it as controllable and exercise control.

Control has been seen to be an important factor in coping with loss, depending on the individual's particular coping style. Appraisals of control often differ when comparing situations in which problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping are employed (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). In their study of coping in a middle-aged community sample, problem-focused coping increased in situations that were appraised as alterable with the potential for control, and emotion focused coping increased in situations that were appraised as not easily changeable or not at all able to change. This demonstrated the significance of situational appraisals and how they can influence the type of coping used. Folkman's (1984) study addresses how control expectancies are related to primary appraisals of situations. She explains this in terms of challenge and threat appraisals, where a challenge appraisal should produce a more positive outcome. The challenge appraisal should facilitate effective problem-focused coping, whereas the threat appraisal can invoke distressing emotions that may impede problem-focused coping and gear the individual towards emotion focused-coping.

When determining controllability it is important to focus on how controllable the event is, however, personal factors and beliefs may also be involved. According to Rotter's (1966) locus of control theory, there are two types: internal and external.

Internal control refers to individuals who believe that reinforcements are contingent upon their own behavior, capacities or attributes. External control refers to individuals who believe that reinforcements are not under their personal control but rather are under the control of powerful others, luck, chance, fate, etc. (p.618)

These differences in control types are best seen in ambiguous situations, where both chance and fault could be involved and the individual must choose where the control lies. Folkman's (1984) study shows similar results. Her study found that in a highly ambiguous situation, an individual with an internal locus of control would appraise the situation as controllable, whereas an individual with an external locus of control would appraise the situation as uncontrollable. These studies, once again, demonstrate the situational effects of determining control, and promote the idea that controllability is more situational than based on personal belief.

Anderson's (1977) longitudinal study of ninety entrepreneurs examined the relationship between locus of control, coping behaviors, perceived stress, and performance in a managerial context. The study looked at the nature of locus of control as a possible cause of behavior and also as an effect of experience. The results of this study show a reciprocal relationship; locus of control orientation influenced performance/experience, and performance/experience functioned as a feedback mechanism that influenced future locus of control orientation. This was demonstrated in that individuals with internal loci of control who displayed improved performance tended to become more internal, and those with external loci of control who displayed poorer performance tended to become more external. Externals were shown to use more emotion-directed (emotion-focused) coping and less task-oriented or (problem-focused) coping than internals.

In addition to looking at control through the dimensions of internal and external, Frazier (2003) suggests a temporal model of examining control, where past, present, and future controls, all in the context of personal control, have different relations to measures of adjustment, as demonstrated in her study of posttraumatic adjustment. She defines past control as an

individual's belief that he or she had control over the occurrence of a previous trauma, future control as an individual's belief that he or she will be able to control or will be able to prevent and/or avoid the occurrence of future traumas, and present control as focusing on the present and what one can do about the impact of the event in present time, rather than whether the event could have been avoided or whether other events will be avoided in the future. Past control was generally not associated with adjustment or was associated with more distress, due to the possible behavioral self-blame that occurs, present control was consistently associated with better emotional adjustment, and future control was also associated with better adjustment, but with mixed results between women and men (Frazier 2001). Frazier (2003) also addresses the concept of vicarious control in all three types of control in the temporal model, described as follows:

Vicarious control refers to the perception that some other person or entity (e.g., God) had control over the occurrence of the event (vicarious past control), has control over whether the event will happen again (vicarious future control), or has control over the current impact of the event (vicarious present control) (p. 1258).

The present study addresses past control as well as vicarious past control, designating between control of other forces and control of God.

This study examines two types of loss: bereavement and relationship dissolution, both of which are prevalent and fairly universal among individuals in Western society. Bereavement, especially sudden bereavement, can be considered a trauma and a formidable loss as it can destroy an individual's beliefs about the controllability and the predictability of the world (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). Bereaved individuals may think about whether they could have prevented the loss, finding themselves culpable for some aspect that led to the loss, whether true



or not (Frazier 2004). In a study of the effects of having lost a spouse or child in a motor vehicle crash, Lehman et al. (1987) reported that over half of their sample, both bereaved parents and bereaved spouses, found themselves thinking “If only I had done something differently, my [spouse/child] would still be alive” (p. 226). The bereaved may also think about whether they will be able to prevent similar future losses, and what about the loss they can currently control (Frazier, 2004).

Relationship dissolution is also discussed as a formidable loss, although there is variability in how people are affected by the loss of a significant romantic relationship (Frazier & Cook, 1993). There are benefits to intimate relationships, such as social support, companionship, love, and sexual involvement (Laumann et al., 1994; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). These benefits are usually all met only by a significant other, and are not all found within friendships and other casual relationships. Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham (2010) found that college students in committed romantic relationships reported fewer mental health problems than single college students, along with lower overweight and obesity scores according to their BMI. The importance of these premarital romantic relationships is also explained, as they are a step in the usual trajectory towards marriage, and married individuals tend to experience better physical and psychological well-being than single individuals. Because marriage and romantic relationships tend to have these advantageous buffering effects against negative life events, we are interested looking at how individuals cope with relationship dissolution. Relationship dissolution is also important for research because breakups often provide incentive for individuals to seek therapy, and information on the correlates of distress following a breakup, including perceived control, can have important clinical implications (Frazier & Cook, 1993).

Rhoades et al. (2011) examined how unmarried relationship dissolution is related to mental health and life satisfaction in a prospective study. They found that there are characteristics in individual relationships that can aggravate or buffer the potential negative effects of breaking up. A major characteristic is commitment, which can be affected by a number of elements including satisfaction with the relationship, alternative quality, that is, romantic options outside of the relationship, and how invested each partner is (Fine & Sacher, 1997). This factor of investment has interesting implications because while investment, in the form of shared resources, is found in almost all relationships, relationships with more investments are associated with greater declines after a breakup, for example, living with your partner or having plans to marry your partner led to more decline in life satisfaction after the relationship ended (Rhoades et al., 2011). Fine and Sacher (1997) also found that the extent to which individuals experience distress after relationship commitment is dependent on the degree to which they were emotionally attached to the relationship.

The present study looks at control and relationship dissolution because studies have found control to be prevalent in individuals' post-breakup adjustment. Those who perceive a breakup as uncontrollable have been found to suffer from depressed mood (Peterson et al, 1985). Fine and Sacher (1997) found that men reported more distress when they perceived that their partner had initiated the breakup, possibly because males' self-esteem may be particularly vulnerable to the perception of rejection. Duck (1982) suggests that females may feel that they had control over many of the events that led up to the breakup even if they were not the initiator, whereas males may interpret the initiation as the only significant event. It has also been found that partners who initiate relationship dissolution tend to report less post-breakup distress than non-initiators (Sprecher, 1994). The partner who perceives the breakup as uncontrollable and had

not initiated the breakup may still want to be in the relationship and therefore experience more distress (Frazier & Cook, 1993). Additionally, those who also perceived their future relationship outcomes to be uncontrollable were also more depressed following a breakup (Peterson et al., 1985).

The purpose of this research was to test predictions derived from the previous research available regarding perceived control and the possibility of its benefit in coping with loss and adjustment. The study looks at undergraduate responses to losses experienced in the past six months, specifically bereavement and relationship dissolution, because these are experiences of loss that university aged students (18-25) commonly experience but also that likely differ in how controllable they are perceived to be. Both of these events can have a profound impact on an individual's life and, particularly soon after the event, can impair functioning as they are both formidable losses that can change the foundation of one's daily life. Bereavement and relationship dissolution share the characteristics that they both involve attachment to a person the individual has now lost connection to, either via death or the loss of a serious romantic partner, and both are normative and public events with models for coping because we so often see others we know dealing with these kinds of losses (Frazier, 2004). While these two events have some similarities, there are also obvious differences. Bereavement involves the permanent and irreversible loss of a loved one, whereas a breakup may not be permanent, and involves only the disconnection from a loved one. There is likely to be more variability in how people are affected by the loss of a romantic relationship, as there are so many components involved with the success of the relationship and in the manner in which it was terminated. In regard to control, both bereaved individuals and individuals who have recently experienced relationship dissolution may think about how they could have prevented the loss, how they can prevent future losses such

as the death of other love ones or future breakups, and what about the loss they can currently control.

In this study, we identified undergraduate students from a large Northeastern research university who had experienced bereavement or relationship dissolution as their most significant loss in the six months before the study was conducted. Different predictions were made regarding the relationship between control and adjustment for both events. First, it was hypothesized that perceived personal control (i.e., control the individual had over the loss) would be associated with better adjustment for both the relationship dissolution group and the bereavement group (Hypothesis 1). Secondly, we predicted that perceived control by other forces (vicarious past control) would be associated with poorer adjustment for both groups, because the individuals may have felt that they did not have control over the situation (Hypothesis 2). For relationship dissolution, this could be a situation where the partner initiated the breakup, and for bereavement, this could have been due to an accident or a situation where the death was another person's fault or someone else was responsible. Finally, we predicted that control by a higher power (e.g., God) would be associated with better adjustment and more commonly reported for the bereavement group, and unassociated or associated with better adjustment for the relationship dissolution group, because while seeking religion to cope has been found with bereavement (Anderson et al., 2006), it is less researched in regard to relationship dissolution (Hypothesis 3).

## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants were undergraduate students recruited from a pool of students in introductory psychology courses through the Psychology Department Participant Pool website at a large Northeastern public university. They were selected from a sample of 284 undergraduate students

participating in a larger data set that examined coping with life transitions where participants completed surveys. Of these participants, 29% ( $n = 83$ ) reported that their most significant loss in the past six months had been a death of a loved one, and 26% ( $n = 75$ ) reported this to be the loss of a romantic relationship, making the cumulative total of participants in this study 158. Of the participants included in the current analyses, 114 (72%) were female and 44 (28%) were male. 79% identified as White/Caucasian. Most (93%) participants were between 18 and 21.

### *Measures*

*Demographic questionnaire:* Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire that included questions about gender, ethnicity, age, year in school, and current religious affiliation.

*Most significant loss:* Participants were asked to describe in detail the most significant loss they had experienced in the past six months prior to the study. Students then indicated whether the type of loss was a “death,” “loss – romantic relationship,” “loss – friendship,” “loss – family,” “move,” “material loss,” or “other.” Only those who indicated that their loss was a “death” (scored as 1) or a “loss – romantic relationship” (scored as 2) were included in the data analysis because the smaller number of individuals in the other types of loss would have led to considerable imbalance in the statistical analyses.

*Measure of control:* Control was assessed using the Park Views Scale (Park et al., 2010). Participants indicated, in terms of past control, how much they felt they had personal control over the loss (“*How much control do you feel you had over the loss you experienced?*”), how much control was in the hands of other forces (“*How much control do you feel other forces had over the loss you experienced?*”), and how much control as in the hands of a higher power (“*How*

*much control do you feel God had over the loss you experienced?”*). Responses were made on a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *very much*).

*Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS)*: the SWLS (Diener, 1985) is a 5-item self-report measure designed to measure global life satisfaction, a factor in the general construct of subjective well-being. For this study, participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with a list of statements (e.g. “In most ways my life is close to my ideal,” “I am satisfied with my life”) and completed the measure using responses on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

*Positive states of mind (PSOM)*: PSOM were measured using the PSOM Scale (Horowitz, Adler, & Kegeles, 1988), which looks at experiences of focused attention, productivity, responsible caretaking, restful repose, sensuous nonsexual pleasure, sensuous sexual pleasure, and sharing. Responses are indicated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*unable to experience this even though I have wanted to*) to 4 (*easy to experience*) with an additional point 88 (*not relevant – have not wanted to experience*).

*Stress-related growth*: Participants also completed a measure of stress-related growth using a 15-item revised version of the Stress-related growth scale (SRGS) (Park et al., 1996). For this revised version, items were reworded using second-person pronouns, for example, “You learned to be nicer to others” and “You learned to find more meaning in life.” Participants rated how much each statement applied to them in response to the loss they had earlier described by choosing one of the following responses: 0 = *not at all*; 1 = *somewhat*; 2 = *a great deal*.

*Impact of event*: To assess subjective distress to a traumatic event, specifically the losses reported, the Impact of Event Scale-Revise (IES-R) was used (Weiss & Marmar, 1997). In this 22-item self-report questionnaire, items are grouped into three subscales: “intrusion”, “avoidance”

and “hyper arousal”. Participants rated a list of statements (e.g., Intrusion item: “Any reminder brought back feelings about it,” Avoidance item: “I tried not to think about it”) on a 5-point scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*), and were calculated by adding the scores for each individual subscale. Because this study looks at adjustment to losses that do not typically induce Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), only the subscales of intrusion and avoidance were analyzed.

### Results

In the present analyses, type of loss (“death” vs. “loss – romantic relationship”) served as the independent variable. Dependent variables and measures were examined using correlations and t-tests. Descriptive data for the two samples for the adjustment measures are presented in Table 1. Averages for the measures of control show that participants in the bereavement sample answered highest for control of a higher power, whereas those in the relationship dissolution sample answered highest for control of other forces. The bereavement sample mean scored below the midpoint on the Intrusion and Avoidance scales, whereas the relationship dissolution sample reported higher means on both scales, with scores above the midpoint. The average score on the Satisfaction with Life Scale was above the scale midpoint (in the agree range) for both samples. Average scores for the Positive States of Mind measure were above the midpoint for both groups as well. The Stress-Related Growth scores were similar for both groups, with means slightly above the midpoint.

Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare the bereaved individuals to the individuals who had experienced relationship dissolution across the measures of adjustment to assess any significant overall differences in responses. Means and standard deviations for both groups across all measures are found in Table 1. The groups did not differ significantly in life satisfaction or stress-related growth. There were differences for Intrusion;  $t(156) = -3.50$ ,  $p$

= .001, Avoidance;  $t(156) = -3.36$ ,  $p = .001$ , and Positive States of Mind;  $t(156) = -2.24$ ,  $p = .027$ .

Intrusion and avoidance scores were, on average, lower for the bereavement group than the relationship dissolution group, while Positive States of Mind scores were, on average, higher for the bereavement group.

Perceptions of the controllability of the loss were compared across the two events. An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare type of control for both loss conditions. For personal control, there was a significant difference in the scores for the bereavement ( $M=1.18$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ) and relationship dissolution ( $M=2.44$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) conditions with participants in the relationship dissolution group reporting more personal control;  $t(108.18) = -9.28$ ,  $p = .000$ . Participants in the bereavement group ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ) reported more for control by a higher power than participants in the relationship dissolution ( $M=1.91$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ) group;  $t(154) = .29$ ,  $p = .001$ . There was not a significant difference in the scores for control by other forces;  $t(156) = -1.38$ ,  $p = .169$ .

We next assessed the extent to which perceived control were associated with adjustment between both groups of bereavement and relationship dissolution and each of the measures. Correlations among the different types of control and adjustment measures for bereavement are presented in Table 2. First, in the bereavement sample, personal control was unrelated to all adjustment measures except for PSOM, with which it was negatively correlated, in contrast to our hypothesis. Second, control by other forces for the bereavement sample was positively correlated with intrusion and avoidance measures, and negatively correlated with PSOM, showing poorer adjustment, as hypothesized. Last, control by a higher power was not significantly correlated with any of the adjustment measures for bereavement. Correlations for the relationship dissolution sample are presented in Table 3. There were no significant



correlations with the exception of the negative correlation between control by a higher power and avoidance. Contrary to our hypothesis, neither the belief that one had control over the event nor the belief that other forces controlled the event were related to adjustment.

### Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between various types of perceived control and adjustment among individuals who had experienced one of two losses: bereavement and relationship dissolution. Because there are many different aspects to these losses, it is likely that they would differ in how controllable they are perceived to be and in the types of control that participants selected in each situation. Type of loss, type of perceived control, and scores on various measures of adjustment were analyzed. We hypothesized that personal control would be associated with better adjustment across both groups (Hypothesis 1), as it is commonly assumed that assuming control over a situation will yield positive results in coping. It was also predicted that control of other forces would be associated with poorer adjustment for both groups (Hypothesis 2), for the same reasons as Hypothesis 1. Finally, we predicted that control by a higher power would be associated with better adjustment for the bereavement group, and either unassociated or associated with better adjustment for the relationship dissolution group (Hypothesis 3), because we felt that spiritual beliefs would be more likely to influence one's perceptions when the loss was a death.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, we found no significant correlations between personal control for either group or any of the adjustment measures with the exception of positive states of mind in the bereavement sample, where we found a negative correlation. This was unexpected, as studies have previously found that individuals with greater perceptions of control tend to be less depressed and better adjusted, and that perceived control is associated with more successful

coping (Thompson & Spacapan, 1991; Thompson et al., 1993). Our lack of and somewhat contradictory findings may have been due to participants' interpretation of the control measures. Studies that have found perceived control to be positively associated with adjustment typically describe that control as either over the event or the coping process. Our measure for control is directed more towards control over the event alone, and participants likely interpreted it as such. High scores of personal control were reported least among the three types of control for the bereavement group, because perhaps those experiencing bereavement are less likely to feel they had control over the event. Feeling control over this type of loss may lead to negative feelings of guilt and responsibility, which may also explain our finding of a negative correlation with positive states of mind. Depending on the type of death, participants could have felt various degrees of personal control and still felt negatively about the event. Closeness to the individual who passed away may also be a factor, as individuals may feel they had more control if they were more involved with the deceased prior to his or her death, for example, if the deceased was seriously ill and the individual was invested in their treatment and made choices regarding the care they received. In this case, because death was not avoided, the person may have negative thoughts and feelings towards the event because they perhaps could have avoided it had they chosen another method of action. In regard to relationship dissolution, scores for personal control were higher than they were for bereavement, perhaps implying the general level of involvement that our participants had in their breakups, or the degree to which they agreed with and/or initiated the breakup. A breakup is a normative event that typically involves two people; therefore it is possible that one would feel more personal control in this situation.

As predicted in Hypothesis 2, control of other forces for the bereavement group was positively correlated with higher scores on the intrusion and avoidance measures and negatively

correlated with PSOM. This can be interpreted as, in general, these individuals experienced more feelings of intrusion and avoidance, as well as lower experiences of positive states of mind. This was expected for bereavement, as perceiving the death to be in the hands of another individual may be associated with negative feelings of blaming that individual. If the death was of unnatural causes or unexpected, an individual may look for answers and be unable to find them, which may lead to increased distress. There were no significant correlations for control of other forces for the relationship dissolution group. This was surprising because we expected, at least for individuals who had recently experienced a breakup as their most significant loss, to hold their former significant other accountable for the end of the relationship. Perhaps because the loss was within a six-month timeframe, those who had experienced a breakup less recently may have come to terms with it and eventually agreed with it. The gender inequality (73% women, 27% men) in this study also may have influenced this, as men typically experience more distress if they perceive a lack of control in the breakup, and women do not appear to react in the same way (Fine & Sacher, 1997).

Our findings did not support Hypothesis 3 predictions for the bereavement group, as there were no significant correlations between control of a higher power and any of the adjustment measures. For the relationship dissolution group, the only significant finding was a negative correlation between control of a higher power and avoidance. The general absence of a relationship between control of a higher power and positive adjustment was unexpected given the findings of several studies which demonstrate God-control to be positively correlated with coping and adjustment (Newton & McIntosh, 2010). It is possible, as discussed in Chapter 1 of Hood, Hill & Spilka (2009), that those who align themselves with a higher power through religion may indulge in the perception that they have a share in that higher power's control, and

therefore do not interpret that control as solely belonging to the higher power, and view themselves as having control. For the bereavement group, scores were, on average, highest for control of a higher power, displaying the importance of this type of control. The lack of significant correlations with adjustment may have been a result of our measures, and perhaps measures that examined adjustment including items that addressed feelings towards God and religious coping may have led to more significant results. This study did not examine religious affiliations or religiosity, so it may be possible that our participants were able to loosely attribute control to God or a higher power, but were not invested in this idea so that their adjustment scores were unrelated. Additional research is needed to assess the relationship between control of a higher power and how it affects bereaved individuals' adjustment. For the relationship dissolution group, we saw some of the results we expected, with a negative correlation between control of a higher power and avoidance, however it is clear that more research needs to be done to determine whether these measures are appropriate and what other methods researchers can implement to determine the importance of control in regard to adjustment and positive coping.

It is clear that the field of perceived control is important because it has implications for the ways in which individuals will cope and take an active part in their recovery from a traumatic loss. As a clinical implication, identifying the degree and type of controllability that people have over an event can be key to determining the best and most appropriate method of coping and possible methods of therapy. Along with the items we measured, looking at perceived control over recovery and future control, as Frazier (2004) did, should be looked at across a multitude of events. Our findings are a glimpse into what future studies can examine such as looking into the importance of control of a higher power, examining personal control and whether it is always associated with negative adjustment, and looking into control of other forces and how to prevent

this association if it is found to consistently be associated with negative adjustment, as our findings found.

While the data supported the hypothesis that control by other forces is correlated with negative adjustment for bereaved individuals across a number of measures, there are a number of areas that future research should explore to further solidify these findings. First, it is important to determine whether the belief that control is in the hands of other people leads to poor adjustment to a loss, or whether those who are already coping poorly tend to believe in control of other forces, at least in terms of their current loss. It would also be of interest to examine whether this view is global, outside of the loss, or only particular to the loss, to see whether this perception of control is being used as a coping mechanism, or if it is part of a larger scale of thinking for the individual. A downside to the current literature available is that the studies are retrospective, and any analysis of global views of control prior to the loss is all self reported. Although difficult to design, a prospective study that analyzes participants' worldviews prior to the loss, and after the loss would be the best way to determine whether the loss changed or influenced participants' perspectives.

### *Limitations*

The cross-sectional design of the data eliminated our ability to determine causality—assessment of whether a type of control led to adjustment, or whether a participant's adjustment influenced the type of control he or she employed. A longitudinal design for similar studies in the future would be useful in avoiding this issue. Because this study was conducted at a Northeastern university, results may not generalize well to other populations in different geographic areas, as well as people of different ages or uneducated populations. Our results are

only generalizable to individuals who have experienced the same events of bereavement and relationship dissolution because there is so much variability in the relation between control and adjustment across all types of events and different types of loss. Conclusions drawn about the effects of our study are limited by the lack of match comparison groups who had not experienced a loss, as control groups. Additionally, this study utilized self-reports throughout, and did not control for third variables such as personality that may have influenced the way participants reported their responses. While some of our results were significant, we were surprised by the lack of significant results for the relationship dissolution group, along with the variable significance in the bereavement group. A more comprehensive arrangement of measures for adjustment may allow for more data to provide significant results. In addition, because both of these losses can be seen as a loss of a close relationship, a measure that assesses personal relationships, such as the Relational-Interdependent Self Construal (RISC) Scale (REF) may be of use in future studies.

The measures of control that we used led to difficulty in determining whether participants were answering in regard to only the event, or the event and their reaction to it. Future studies should give detailed instructions on which facet of control they are measuring in order to avoid this confusion. In this study, general worldviews in regard to control were not measured or coded, however could prove interesting in future research in order to assess whether the loss influenced or changed one's perception of control over the event. Another interesting area for future research would be future control, as used in Frazier's (2004) study, compared with these two groups. Because both death and relationship dissolution are normative events, it would be interesting to examine participant's views on future control and how prior losses influence the type of control they feel could impact the future occurrence of a similar event. Future research

should also consider the benefits of a prospective study, in order to avoid self-report measures and to identify participants' perceived control prior to and after a loss.

This study used a six-month parameter for the time in which the loss was experienced, however, this may have influenced responses on adjustment measures, particularly for those in the relationship dissolution group. Depending on the length of the relationship, and when the break-up was experienced, participants who have experienced a breakup five or six months prior to the study may have already been better adjusted than those who had experienced a breakup more recently. Assuming enough participants are available, future studies that investigate relationship dissolution might be interested in using a smaller time frame, or asking the approximate date of the event to better control for this. Additionally, the present study did not investigate into and examine if participants initiated the break-up, if their partner did, or if the break-up was mutual, and if these findings have any impact on perceived control.

### *Concluding Remarks*

While it may be difficult to conclude from this specific study that different types of control are related to different levels of adjustment, we can note that there appears to be some kind of relationship that is worth investigating further. Determining a relationship between control and analysis can lead to better clinical analysis of a client's coping. Another advantage to gaining information in this area might be the development of mechanisms to teach individuals to attribute control in the best way to enhance their adjustment to a traumatic loss. Control appraisals are related to primary appraisals, which Folkman (1984) found to be related to stress and coping mechanisms, making this an important subject for the field of psychology to continue to investigate.

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TABLE 1.

*Descriptive Statistics for Bereavement and Relationship Dissolution Sample*

	Bereavement ( <i>n</i> = 83) Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Relationship Dissolution ( <i>n</i> = 75) Mean ( <i>SD</i> )
Control:		
Personal control <sup>a</sup>	1.18 (0.54)	2.44 (1.06)
Control of other forces <sup>a</sup>	2.39 (1.29)	2.64 (1.02)
Control of higher power <sup>a</sup>	2.52 (1.24)	1.91 (1.11)
Adjustment:		
Intrusion <sup>b</sup>	1.83 (0.77)	2.26 (0.79)
Avoidance <sup>b</sup>	1.78 (0.67)	2.14 (0.67)
Life satisfaction <sup>c</sup>	4.87 (1.22)	4.56 (1.42)
Positive states of mind <sup>d</sup>	3.26 (0.54)	3.07 (0.52)
Stress-related growth <sup>e</sup>	1.24 (0.53)	1.29 (0.49)

*Note* <sup>a</sup> Scale: 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *very much*. <sup>b</sup> Scale: 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*. <sup>c</sup> Scale: 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. <sup>d</sup> Scale: 1 = *unable to experience this even though I have wanted to* to 4 = *easy to experience*. <sup>e</sup> Scale: 0 = *not at all* to 2 = *a great deal*.

Table 2.

*Correlations among Control and Adjustment Measures for Bereavement Sample*

	Intrusion	Avoidance	Life Satisfaction	PSOM	SRG
Personal Control	.183	.171	-.177	-.382**	.126
Control of Other Forces	.328**	.268*	.046	-.227*	.041
Control of Higher Power	.086	-.010	.055	.156	-.074

Note \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$

Table 3.

*Correlations among Control and Adjustment Measures for Relationship Dissolution Sample*

	Intrusion	Avoidance	Life Satisfaction	PSOM	SRG
Personal Control	.139	.010	-.026	-.019	.109
Control of Other Forces	.096	.030	-.112	-.152	-.015
Control of Higher Power	-.095	-.271*	.022	.048	.172

Note \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$