

Taking charge: Perceptions of control over life chances

by Anne Milan

Most people have moments when they feel that their lives are going along as planned, while at other times nothing seems to go right. In these situations, they might feel in complete command of the paths they follow, and view their achievements – or even their failures – as the result of their own efforts and abilities. Alternatively, they might feel that certain aspects of life are beyond their control, and that fate, destiny, luck or a higher power play an important role in how their lives unfold.

The concept of mastery refers to an individual's perception that she has control over her own life. A person's response to events can be influenced by many factors that affect his assessment of his own role in society as well as his future outcomes. Of course, there are larger situations at the national or international level which are beyond the realm of individual control, such as business cycles in the economy or natural disasters. However, people with high levels of perceived control are "effective forces in their own lives"¹, and are likely "to accumulate resources and to develop skills and habits that prevent avoidable problems and reduce the impact of unavoidable problems."² This, in turn, can produce a reciprocal effect between achievements and sense of mastery over life chances which could influence many areas of a person's life.

GST What you should know about this study

Using the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS), this paper examines the extent of perceptions of control over life chances for individuals aged 15 and over. The results are based on a sample of about 22,600 people representing over 23 million Canadians.

Sense of mastery was determined by asking respondents if they strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that:

- they have little control over the things that happen to them;
- there is really no way they can solve some of the problems they have;
- there is little they can do to change many of the important things in their lives;
- they often feel helpless in dealing with problems of life;
- sometimes they feel that they are being pushed around in life;
- what happens to them in the future mostly depends on them;
- they can do just about anything they really set their mind to.

These factors were then combined to form a mastery scale,¹ ranging in value from 0 to 28, which measures the extent to which individuals believe that their lives are under their own control. Higher scores indicate a greater sense of mastery.

Readers should note that it is not possible to identify the realms in which respondents felt they controlled their lives. Perceptions of control could be context-specific in that people might feel in control of certain areas of their lives, but not others. For example, someone might feel powerless when faced with a health problem, but still believe that they can achieve their desired education, marriage or family goals.

Life satisfaction was measured as respondents' satisfaction with their lives as a whole on a ten-point scale ranging from a score of 0 ("very dissatisfied") to 10 ("very satisfied").

A statistical model was developed in order to examine the influence of a number of characteristics on the sense of personal control. These characteristics included: age, sex, household language, immigration status, region of residence, marital status, number of close friends and relatives, education, main activity, occupation, household income, group membership, volunteer status, religiosity, life satisfaction, perceived health status, and happiness.

1. The scale which measures sense of mastery is based on the work of L.I. Pearlin and C. Schooler. 1978. "The structure of coping." *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* 19(1):2-21.

This paper uses the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine the extent to which Canadians aged 15 and over feel a sense of mastery, or responsibility for what happens to them in life. A mastery scale, comprised of seven indicators measuring such elements as the respondent's perceived control over things that happen in life, problem-solving capability, feelings of helplessness and the ability to accomplish goals, was used in the analysis. A statistical model was also designed to examine the influence of a number of socio-demographic, family, economic, community and well-being characteristics on the respondent's sense of personal control.

Indicators of control over life chances

In general, Canadians have a fairly high sense of being in charge of the circumstances in which they find themselves. According to the GSS data, the average score was 18.8 on the scale ranging from 0 to 28

(the higher the score, the greater the sense of mastery). Specifically, nearly nine in ten (89%) respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that what happens to them in the future mostly depends on them. Similarly, 84% agreed that they could do just about anything in life that they really set their mind to. In contrast, only about three in ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes felt pushed around in life or that they have little control over the things that happen to them.

Most Canadians also reported positive feelings about managing the problems in their lives. (These results are based on each respondent's own interpretation of what constitutes "problems.") Indeed, 77% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there is little one can do to change many important things in life. At least seven in ten rejected the statements that they often felt helpless in dealing with problems of life or that there is really no way to solve some of their problems.

Younger adults are most likely to feel in control

The perception of control over life peaks for adults aged 25 to 34 and then declines steadily. For example, on the mastery scale, the average score for people in their late 20s and early 30s was 19.6, then falls to 18.2 for those in their early fifties and to 16.7 for seniors in their late seventies. Consistent with previous research which found that perceived control declined at older ages³, this reduced sense of mastery may reflect lower energy and physical health changes as well as the loss of valued social roles.⁴ Perhaps younger adults feel that most of their lives are still ahead of them, and as a result, they are more optimistic about their chances in life. In contrast, people may become more realistic with age, basing their expectations on their cumulative experiences. Results of the statistical model show that even after taking into account other characteristics, the relationship held between age and a person's sense of control.

There was some evidence that men experienced a greater feeling of mastery than women, but the difference between the sexes was not large. A 2002 American study found that men generally have a greater sense of control than do women, particularly at older ages,⁵ perhaps because of women's less secure economic conditions (for example, less attachment to the labour force, lower average incomes and so on). Converging labour market experiences and educational levels of men and women may contribute to growing similarity in perceptions of control.

Both place of birth and region of residence played a role in how individuals perceived their ability to affect their situations and outcomes. According to the GSS data, foreign-born individuals feel less in control of their lives than do Canadian-born individuals. (Mastery score values averaged 18.1 for immigrants arriving before 1990; 17.5 for those landing between 1990 and 2003; and 19.0 for people born in Canada.) Immigrants



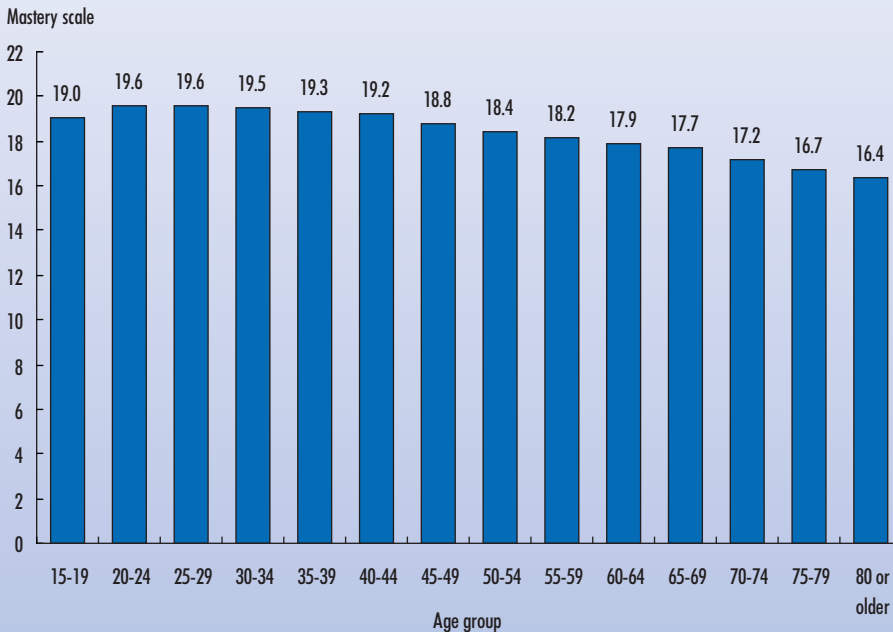
In general, Canadians have a fairly high sense of being in charge of the circumstances in which they find themselves

% of Canadians aged 15 and over

	Total	Agree or strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree or strongly disagree
I believe that...				
... what happens to me in the future mostly depends on me	100	89	4	7
... I can do just about anything I really set my mind to	100	84	6	10
... sometimes I feel that I am being pushed around in life	100	32	7	61
... I have little control over the things that happen to me	100	30	9	61
... I often feel helpless in dealing with problems of life	100	23	7	70
... there is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have	100	21	6	73
... there is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life	100	18	5	77

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

Feelings of personal control are highest for people in their twenties



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

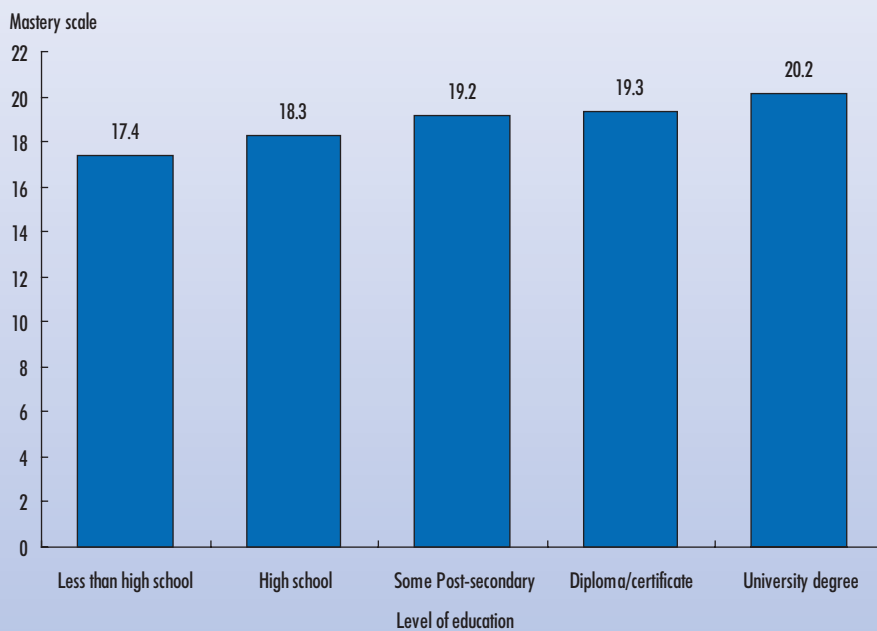
may feel that they are confronted with more obstacles to achieving their goals than people born in this country. In fact, studies have found that foreign-born individuals may face difficulty obtaining work experience in Canada or having their previous work experience or qualifications recognized in Canada⁶ and, as a result, be underemployed.⁷

Region of residence also influenced perceived control. Compared to living in Quebec (mastery score of 18.0), living in any of the other regions was associated with a greater sense of control (ranging from 18.8 in the Atlantic Provinces to 19.3 in the Prairies). These relationships between place of birth, region of residence and mastery remain significant, even after accounting for all other variables in the statistical model.

Higher education key to perceived control

Social position, as reflected by various indicators of socio-economic status, can have an effect on an individual's sense of self, and presumably, on perceptions of control over his or her life. Indeed, the GSS data show that there is a clear relationship between education, household income, type of job and feelings of personal control over one's life. In terms of education, people who were university-educated scored 20.0 on the mastery scale, while those with less than high school scored 17.3. It may be that higher education provides people with the tools and resources necessary for meeting their goals, not only in terms of career development, but in other areas of life as well. These "learned effectiveness"⁸ skills – which may include being persistent, more adept at communication and able to gather, interpret and analyze information – can be directed toward problem-solving and achieving one's objectives. Higher education levels might also reflect more experience negotiating with large and complex organizations, for example social services, government or health systems.

Among 25- to 54-year-olds, feelings of personal control are highest for those with higher levels of education



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

Perceptions of control over life are also influenced by a person's career. Average scores on the mastery scale were over 20.0 for those in management or professional occupations, but were below 18.0 for employees in blue-collar occupations related to processing, manufacturing, and utilities. Individuals who were not in the labour force scored even lower – an average of only 17.4. Even when accounting for other characteristics in the statistical model, these relationships held. The reason may be that the self-confidence common to people with more autonomy and control in their jobs extends to other aspects of their lives. An earlier study also found that the sense of personal control is greater among people with paid jobs than those not in the labour force and, furthermore, that the difference increases with more job autonomy and higher income.⁹

Consistent with the findings of education and occupation, the GSS data showed that respondents with household incomes of less than \$20,000 reported a lower sense of control over life chances (an average score of 16.8) than those in households earning \$60,000 or more (19.9). While it may not necessarily be true that "money buys happiness," it does provide a greater perception of being in charge of one's life. This sense of control might also arise from greater feelings of financial security when confronted with unexpected problems.

Physical and emotional well-being important to feeling in charge of life

There was a substantial difference in perceptions of control depending on the health status of respondents. People who rated themselves as being in excellent health, scored an average of 20.0 on the mastery scale, compared to 16.1 for those who reported that their health was fair or poor. While it is possible to take responsibility for certain aspects of one's health, with measures such as exercise, diet or lifestyle, accidents

and some illnesses are beyond one's control. Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals in less than optimal health feel that their sense of mastery is lower than that of others with little or no health challenges.

Indicators of emotional well-being, such as level of happiness and life satisfaction, are also associated with perceptions of control over life. People who were somewhat or very unhappy scored only 14.9 on the mastery scale, whereas those who were very happy scored 19.8. It seems, therefore, that when people experience positive feelings, they believe they exert more control over the situations in which they find themselves.

It should be noted that the relationship between indicators of well-being and perceptions of control over life chances may be reciprocal. For example, feeling in control may be mitigated by health problems or dissatisfaction with life; however, having a reduced sense of mastery could also lead to poorer health or well-being. Indeed, a 2005 study found that a low perception of control over one's own life negatively affects health outcomes, which in turn reduces sense of control.¹⁰

Large social network produces heightened sense of internal control

Involvement with a social network, whether it is membership in a group, having family and friends on whom to rely, or both, can influence a person's internal sense of control. Respondents who were single and those who were living common-law had similar scores on the mastery scale (19.1). In contrast, people who had been widowed felt the least power over their life chances (17.0). This is understandable since it would be more difficult to feel in charge of one's life after experiencing the death of a husband or a wife. In addition, widows are generally older and may be less financially secure, both of which are related to lower perceptions of control. The average

scores for married (18.8) and divorced or separated individuals (18.3) were more moderate. However, once the statistical model controlled for other variables, widowed and divorced people were found to score higher than single people, while people who were married or living common-law had lower scores than unmarried respondents. Perhaps "solo agents" feel they are better-placed to control their lives, since married people need to take their partner into account when making decisions.

Individuals with no close friends or relatives had a much lower sense of control over their life than those who had a wider social network. For example, respondents who said they had no close friends scored 16.9 on the mastery scale, compared to 19.5 for those with at least six friends. Even when holding the effect of other characteristics in the model constant, people with fewer close friends or relatives had a lower perception of their mastery skills than those with six or more people in their social network. Having significant others in one's life can offset feelings of isolation.

Community involvement associated with greater feelings of mastery

Being involved in a social network extending beyond immediate family and friends also appears to increase a person's sense of control over life chances. For example, respondents who did not belong to any organizations scored 17.9 on the mastery scale, compared to 20.1 for those who belonged to three or more groups. Perhaps being part of a larger community gives people a feeling of support that enhances their belief that they can accomplish their goals or overcome obstacles. Being part of a larger network could also help people to mediate or negotiate any difficulties they may be facing.

Similarly, volunteering in the year prior to the survey also increased the perception of control over one's life, possibly because volunteering is

done at the individual's discretion. Alternatively, it may connect people with others, thereby increasing the size of their social networks. Volunteering was associated with a score of 19.5 on the mastery scale, while those who did not scored 18.4. Even after accounting for all other characteristics in the model, this relationship still held. Again the influence may be reciprocal: individuals who have a heightened sense of personal control may be more outgoing and willing to participate in such groups.

Belonging to a religious organization might provide support and a sense of togetherness; on the other hand, believing in a higher power may encourage some people to feel relieved of some responsibility for their life chances. Religiosity – measured as the frequency of attendance at religious services – tended to reduce the amount of control people felt they had over their lives. For example, respondents who attended religious services every week had an average mastery score of 18.3, while those who rarely or never attended services had a score of 19.0. This relationship between being more religious and feeling less control over one's life remained even after taking the impact of other variables into account.

Summary

Although individuals' sense of mastery is quite high, a number of factors can influence a person's perception of control over their life chances. Generally, economic and emotional well-being contribute to a sense of mastery, perhaps by providing them with necessary resources and with the conviction that they have won their achievements by their own efforts. The results of the statistical model developed for this study show that the characteristics offering the strongest explanation for perceived control over life chances are education, income, age, life satisfaction, health and happiness.

Having a larger social support network, particularly close friends and relatives, also increases an individual's internal sense of life management. But while involvement in external groups or organizations and in volunteering increases a person's sense of control, frequent attendance at religious services does not.



Anne Milan is an analyst with the Knowledge and Research Directorate at Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

1. Ross, C.E. and B.A. Broh. 2000. "The roles of self-esteem and the sense of personal control in the academic achievement process." *Sociology of Education* 73(4):273.
2. Ross and Broh. 2000. p. 273.
3. Mirowsky, J. 1995. "Age and the sense of control." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58(1):31-43.
4. Schieman, S. and H.A. Turner. 1998. "Age, disability, and the sense of mastery." *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*. 39(3): 169-186.
5. Ross, C.E. and J. Mirowsky. 2002. "Age and the gender gap in the sense of personal control." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65(2):125-145.
6. Chui, T. and K. Tran. October 2005. *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada: Progress and Challenges of New Immigrants in the Workforce 2003*. Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 89-615-XIE.
7. Galarneau, D. and R. Morissette. 2004. "Immigrants: Settling for less?" *Perspectives on Labour and Income*. 5(6): 5-16.
8. Mirowsky, J. and C.E. Ross. 2005. "Education, cumulative advantage, and health." *Ageing International* 30(1):27-62.
9. Ross, C.E. and J. Mirowsky. 1992. "Households, employment, and the sense of control." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 55(3): 217-235.
10. Mirowsky and Ross. 2005.

	β^1		β^1
Demographic characteristics		Occupation	
Age	-0.09*	<i>Management</i>	0.00
Sex		Professional	-0.04*
<i>Male</i>	0.00	Technologists, technicians, and technical operators	-0.03*
Female	-0.02*	Clerical	-0.06*
Region		Sales and services	-0.07*
<i>Quebec</i>	0.00	Trades, transport and equipment operators	-0.08*
Atlantic	0.04*	Primary industries	-0.06*
Ontario	0.08*	Processing, manufacturing, and utilities	-0.07*
Prairies	0.08*	Not in the labour force ²	-0.10*
British Columbia	0.06*	Household income	
Immigrant status		Less than \$20,000	-0.07*
<i>Canadian-born</i>	0.00	\$20,000 to \$29,999	-0.05*
Immigrated before 1990	-0.04*	\$30,000 to \$39,999	-0.05*
Immigrated between 1990 and 2003	-0.10*	\$40,000 to \$49,999	-0.03*
Family characteristics		\$50,000 to \$59,999	-0.02*
Marital status		<i>\$60,000 or more</i>	0.00
<i>Single</i>	0.00	Not stated or don't know	-0.06*
Married	-0.02*	Other characteristics	
Common-law	0.05	Number of groups of which a member	0.05*
Widowed	0.02*	Volunteered in the past year	
Divorced	0.03*	<i>No</i>	0.00
Number of close friends		Yes	0.02*
None	-0.02*	Religious attendance	
1 or 2	-0.03*	<i>Rarely/not at all</i>	0.00
3 to 5	-0.01	Weekly	-0.06*
<i>Six or more</i>	0.00	Occasionally	-0.03*
Number of close relatives		Well-being characteristics	
None	-0.02*	Life satisfaction	0.19*
1 or 2	-0.05*	Health status	
3 to 5	-0.01	<i>Excellent</i>	0.00
<i>Six or more</i>	0.00	Very good	-0.04*
Economic characteristics		Good	-0.06*
Education level		Fair or poor	-0.10*
<i>University degree</i>	0.00	Happiness	
Less than high school	-0.15*	<i>Very happy</i>	0.00
High school	-0.10*	Less than very happy	-0.09*
Some post-secondary	-0.04*		
Diploma or certificate	-0.06*	Adjusted R squared	0.23

* Statistically significant from benchmark group shown in italics ($p < 0.05$).

1. Standardized regression coefficients expressed in standard deviation units. This is useful in comparing the relative impact of variables on the mastery score within the model.
2. Represents an "other" category of main activity such as childcare, home-making, illness, etc.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.