

Small groups lead; large ones control

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How are relationships established between groups? And how do we learn to distinguish who leads and who controls? A publication led by researchers from the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago with the collaboration of the postdoctoral researcher Jesús Bas from the UPF Center for Brain and Cognition (CBC) found that it is more intuitive to understand who is in control in a conflict situation than

to recognize who leads. The study has been published in the journal *Child Development*.

Human beings tend to form social groups. Within these groups different roles are undertaken, for example, some individuals/groups have greater control over shared resources and others have a greater ability to lead others. "But each group is different from the rest, it has its own characteristics which are configured in a totally specific way," explains Bas, of the CBC's Speech Perception and Acquisition Laboratory, "hence we decided to study two characteristics to see how they interacted: [group size](#) and social [status](#)."

The size of the group can influence the expectations of each group. For example, in a conflict situation, larger groups have greater "strength in numbers" and are therefore more likely to be in control of what happens if conflict arises. However, with other variables of social hierarchy, size is not usually the most important factor and the largest group is not always the one with the highest social status: the case of leadership. "Leadership-based hierarchies often adopt a pyramidal structure, with a numerically smaller group of individuals occupying the highest position," the researchers mention in their article.

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The study involved the participation of 384 children between the ages of 3 and 10 and 610 adults, and they were shown images with two groups of different sizes. They were shown depictions of groups with different proportions (1:19; 2:18; 5:15; 8:12) (see image 1). They were then asked which group they believed was in control or which group they believed was leading.

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Among the children, the answers were less clear. Children of all ages always assumed that it was always the larger group that was in control (results identical to adults). The same was not true for the question about leadership. The researchers found that this concept was not equally shared by all children. It was observed that participants' age and the relative size of the groups presented influenced their responses: the older and the greater the difference between the groups, the greater the tendency to think like adults.

The conclusions of the study reflect that the way in which the social status of a group is understood/inferred varies greatly. In certain situations, size and strength are the structural components of social status, in others, they may be qualities that are not immediately seen, such as intelligence or leadership skills.

"All the age groups studied admit without variation that size is key to knowing who is in control of a conflict situation," Bas continues. "But the same does not occur with leadership; it is less intuitive, we see that it is a more difficult concept to understand and that it is learned over time. This happens because the reasons for an individual/group to lead are more subtle."

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From a very early age, children detect and pay attention to different

characteristics of social groups (e.g., gender, race, language, nationality, etc.). This study shows that the relative size and [social status](#) of groups are also sensitive. This is very important since children's reasoning about the [social groups](#) around them can influence the way they interact with them.

The next step in Jesús Bas's research is to work with other variables and see how they interact. "This study is only the first step, especially since groups do not usually have only two characteristics. The idea is to later include more variables such as gender or age and obtain more complete data," the researcher concludes.

More information: Isobel A. Heck et al, Small groups lead, big groups control: Perceptions of numerical group size, power, and status across development, *Child Development* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13670](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13670)

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