

Research article

Self-esteem is dominated by agentic over communal information

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Abstract

We present a Double Perspective Model (DPM) explaining why agency (competence) and communion (warmth) constitute two basic content dimensions of social cognition. Every social action involves two perspectives: of the agent (a person who performs an action) and of the recipient (a person at whom the action is directed). Immediate cognitive goals of the agent and recipient differ, which results in heightened accessibility and weight of content referring either to agency (from the agent's perspective) or to communion (from the recipient's perspective). DPM explains why evaluations of other persons are dominated by communal over agentic considerations and allows a novel hypothesis that self-esteem is dominated by agentic over communal information. We present several studies supporting this hypothesis. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

In this paper we build on the distinction of agency (competence) and communion (warmth) as the fundamental dimensions of social cognition. We present a Double Perspective Model (DPM) offering a new account of why agency and communion constitute the two basic dimensions. We also present a novel hypothesis resulting from the model—that self-esteem is dominated by agentic over communal information. We begin by shortly reviewing the idea of agency and communion as basic dimensions of social cognition, then present DPM as an explanation of this duality and discuss two main derivations of our model. First, perceptions and evaluations of other persons are dominated by communal over agentic information. As this is a well-established fact now, we only summarize the confirming empirical evidence. Second, the self-cognition (including self-esteem) is dominated by agentic over communal information. As this is a novel prediction, we discuss it in some detail and present a series of supporting studies.

THE DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE MODEL

There is an agreement that social cognition involves two basic dimensions of content on the level of both individuals and social groups. This distinction has always been present in social psychology, though under different names, such as masculine–feminine, agentic–communal, task–relation oriented, individualistic–collectivistic, intellectually–socially, good–bad, competence–morality, or competence–warmth (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Though these distinctions are not identical, they show a considerable overlap when studied empirically on the level of abstract trait-

names frequently used to capture their meaning (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). All the former terms denote intellectual and motivational competence and focus on efficiency of goal-attainment. All the latter terms denote prosocial or antisocial content of the goals and concern about social relations. After Bakan (1966), who first theorized on the duality of human existence – on individuals as having separate goals and being parts of social units—we use “agency” versus “communion” as generic terms capturing the essence of those various distinctions.

Agentic and communal contents constitute the core of the descriptive meaning of concepts used to characterize individuals and social groups in different languages and cultures, they underlie most of these concepts evaluative meaning, they are more accessible than other concepts, and they frequently appear in free descriptions of persons and groups (*cf.* Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Clearly, agency and communion constitute two basic dimensions of social cognition, whatever definition of “basic” is applied. However, it is a bit less clear why these two dimensions should be so important. One account stems from the stereotype content model of Fiske and colleagues (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). This account starts with the assumption, that “on encountering others, people must determine, first, the intentions of the other person or group, and second, their ability to act on those intentions” (Fiske et al., 2007, p. 77). Inferences of beneficial or harmful intentions are made in communal terms, while inferences of abilities to act upon them are made in agentic terms. This explains the widespread use of these two content dimensions as well as the precedence of communal over agentic content, as it is more important to identify a harmful or beneficial intention than to recognize the ability to accomplish the intention.

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In the present work we offer a more comprehensive account of the agency-communion duality which allows a prediction of situations where the agentic content takes precedence over the communal one as well. Our Double Perspective Model (DPM) starts with a simple observation that social behavior always involves two perspectives—the standpoint of an agent, that is a person who performs the act in question, and the standpoint of a recipient, a person at whom the action is directed, who is on the receiving end of action. These two perspectives change dynamically and replace each other as in a conversation where the speaker and the listener take turns. Nevertheless, they lead to different perceptions of what is happening in an interaction, because the immediate goals of the agent and recipient differ. Whereas agents focus on getting an action done (which results in increased accessibility of agentic content), recipients focus on understanding of what is being done and on avoiding harms or acquiring benefits which are brought by the action (which results in increased accessibility of communal content). We assume that the two basic dimensions of social cognition denote these two ubiquitous perspectives. Communal content denotes how much an action and underlying traits serve the immediate interests of the action recipient, while agentic content denotes how much the action closes upon the current goal and serves the interest of the agent. After Peeters (1992), we assume that communion is other-profitable, while agency is self-profitable in nature. Communal qualities are other-profitable because other people (i.e., action recipients, the perceiver included) directly benefit from traits such as kindness, helpfulness, or honesty and are harmed by their opposites. In a similar vein, agentic qualities are self-profitable because they are immediately rewarding for the acting person: Whatever one does, it is better for him or her to do it efficiently. This reasoning was corroborated by a study on a large pool of personality traits (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) showing that the more a trait pertains to agency (e.g., efficient or intelligent), the more it is perceived as serving the interests of the trait possessor, but not the interests of others. Similarly, the more a trait pertains to communion (e.g., helpful or honest), the more it is perceived as serving the interests of others, but not the interests of the trait possessor.

To summarize, the general point of DPM is that the duality of social cognition content (agency vs. communion) reflects the duality of perspectives in social interaction (agent vs. recipient) which is underlain by a difference in interests. We do not assume that the interests of agents and recipients are always contradictory—we only assume that they are different and conceptually independent. Social cognition is highly motivated (Kunda, 1999), which means that it assists current interests of the perceiver, but these interests are served differently depending on the perspective. In the agent perspective the interests are captured by agentic categories, which acquire a prominent role in shaping cognition, affective responses, and resulting behavior. The agentic perspective is assumed mainly when perceiving the self but also when perceiving close others and people whose actions fulfil vicariously the perceiver's interests (like “my lawyer”, *cf.* Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). In the recipient perspective the interests are captured by communal categories, which become dominant in cognition and behavior. This perspective is taken mainly with regard to actions of other people who are doing something to us or to one of us (in-groups). It ensues, that

other-cognition is typically dominated by communal categories, but self-cognition is dominated by agency over communion.

What about perceptions of an uninvolved observer, who is not on the receiving end of an action but is merely witnessing an action? Potentially, the uninvolved observer can take the perspective of either the agent or the recipient, depending on specific goals active in the observer's mind. However, there are serious theoretical and empirical reasons to assume that taking the recipient's perspective is a default option in social perception. As captured succinctly by James's phrase “perceiving is for doing” and the basic dimension of doing is whether to approach or avoid another person (Peeters, 1992). Therefore, attending to social consequences of an action (how it bears on others who are present in the situation) should be as natural for an uninvolved observer as for the action recipient. Indeed, even uninvolved observers evaluate behavioral acts by their social (recipient-relevant) not personal (agent-relevant) consequence. This was shown by Vonk (1999) who asked for evaluation of behaviors (e.g., at a party Dennis publicly criticized his girlfriend) presented with a description of their social consequences (it made her feel very miserable) or a description of personal consequences (his friends got angry with him and told him to apologize). Evaluations of behaviors described with social consequences equalled evaluations of those without any consequences, which suggests that even uninvolved observers inferred those consequences thereby spontaneously taking the perspective of an action recipient. More directly, Wojciszke (1994) asked his participants to construe morally good or bad behaviors performed in an efficient or inefficient way. Those participants who were manipulated to take the agent perspective construed the behaviors in competence-related rather than moral terms, but the opposite was true for participants taking the perspective of both the action recipients and unconcerned observers. Of course, the uninvolved observer can in many situations take the agent perspective (e.g., when learning by modeling or when identifying with the agent). Nevertheless, taking the recipient perspective is probably a default option in the perception of others' actions, although this point is in need of further empirical pursuit.

OTHER-COGNITION IS DOMINATED BY COMMUNION

The dominance of communion in cognition of others and affective responses towards them was shown in various ways. For example, Abele and Wojciszke (2007) analyzed construal of emotionally moving behavior and found a stronger tendency to interpret others' behavior in communal rather than agentic terms (though the opposite was true for own behavior). Wojciszke, Bazinska, and Jaworski (1998) analyzed antecedents of interpersonal attitudes toward real persons finding that 53% of the attitude variance was explained by the perceived communion, but only 29% by the perceived agency of those persons. When those authors orthogonally manipulated information on communal and agentic behavior of target persons, they found that communal information heavily influenced the resulting evaluation (and decided on whether

the impression was positive or negative), whereas agentic information influenced the evaluation weakly (and decided only on how much negative or positive the evaluation was). De Bruin and Van Lange (1999) found impressions to be affected by information referring both to communion and agency, but while the influence of communion was very strong ($d = 2.95$), the influence of agency was much weaker ($d = 1.06$). Also purely emotional responses to the behavior of other people are much stronger when the behavior involves communion (such as moral transgressions or norm-maintenance behavior) compared to behaviors involving agency, such as successes or failures (Wojciszke & Szymkow, 2003).

When forming impressions of others, people more frequently look for information on their communion rather than agency (Brambilla et al., 2010; De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Wojciszke, Bazinska & Jaworski, 1998) and of all traits of the Big Five, people are most interested in drawing inferences on agreeableness (Ames & Bianchi, 2008), a typically communal trait. Semantic categories referring to communion are more accessible than those referring to agency which was shown using different methods (Wentura, Rothermund, & Bak, 2000; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). Even the mere valence of communal information is detected faster than valence of agentic information (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2010). Whatever specific cognitive operation is studied, person cognition seems to be dominated by communal over agentic categories. This effect is predicted by both the stereotype content model and the present DPM, but only DPM predicts a reversal of this tendency in self-cognition.

SELF-COGNITION IS DOMINATED BY AGENCY

According to the DPM, self-perception and resulting affective responses should be dominated by agency over communion because when people look at themselves they typically assume the agentic perspective, which increases the relative importance of agentic considerations. Indeed, when asked to recall and describe episodes which had influenced their thinking on themselves, participants recall actions involving their successes or failures, but not acts of norm-maintenance or norm-breaking which dominate their memory of other people (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, 1994). Also when imaging behaviors construable in both agentic and communal terms, participants who think of themselves to be action recipients construe these behaviors in communal terms, while participants who imagine themselves as agents (or uninvolved observers) of these actions construe them in agentic categories, and this leads to divergent evaluative responses following these interpretations (Wojciszke, 1994). For example, a virtuous failure (a morally positive act which failed due to the lack of efficiency) results in negative evaluations when construed from the agentic perspective (where it is considered mainly as inefficiency), but it leads to positive evaluations from the recipient perspective (where it is considered as decency). Interestingly, when interpreting actions of close others, participants also assume the agentic perspective and interpret actions in agentic rather than communal categories (Wojciszke & Abele, 2008).

The dominance of agency in self-cognition and self-evaluation is suggested by other lines of studies as well. For example, self-efficacy beliefs which concern one's own ability to "organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3) play a major role in self-regulation and goal-striving. Self-efficacy beliefs influence goal-setting, decide on the interpretation of feedback information, shape self-evaluative reactions to performance, and affect motivational perseverance. All these effects culminate in higher performance and better psychological well-being of people with strong beliefs in their own agency. Although researchers typically emphasize the specific nature of self-efficacy beliefs, scales measuring the generalized self-efficacy beliefs have been developed and those scales usually predict performance as well as the specific self-efficacy measures. Interestingly, global self-esteem is very strongly correlated with the generalized self-efficacy belief ($r = .85$ according to the meta-analysis of Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002) and other agentic aspects of the self, like internal locus of control ($r = .52$ according to the same meta-analysis). However, there are no studies reporting significant relations between the self-esteem and communal aspects of the self. Communal beliefs about the self are typically high—it is well known that people assess their virtues as higher than those of others (Alicke et al., 1995) and this self-enhancing effect is higher for communal than agentic traits (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989). Still, such inflated views of own communion or morality do not translate into behavior. For instance, most individuals cheat for pecuniary reasons when given opportunity (Ariely, 2008) and individuals ascribing themselves higher levels of moral responsibility do not behave in a more moral way, though they take a great care to appear moral to others (Batson & Thompson, 2001). Inflated self-ascription of morality may be merely declarative—a lip service to norms and values without real influence on behavior.

All this suggests that people care more about their own agency than communion when construing their own actions. Interestingly, this tendency derives from the same general assumption of motivated social cognition which underlies the previously discussed communion-over-agency effect in cognition of other people. In the current research we argue that social perceivers tend to give more weight to such a content which is motivationally more relevant—be it communion when responding to others or agency when responding to the self. To the best of our knowledge, there is no direct evidence that self-esteem is more strongly based on agentic than communal considerations of self and own behavior. We do not assume that people completely ignore communal information when forming their self-esteem—we only assume that their self-esteem is more driven by agentic than communal considerations. The present line of research is aimed at gathering such evidence.

OVERVIEW

The main thrust of the present research was to show that just like interpersonal evaluations are more strongly based on communal than agentic information, the opposite is true for global self-evaluations. So, our main prediction was that self-esteem is

based to a higher degree on agentic than communal information. In study 1, participants were asked to rate their agentic and communal traits and then to fill in a questionnaire measuring their self-esteem. Subsequently, these trait ascriptions were studied as predictors of global self-esteem with the expectation that self-assessed agency would prove a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-assessed communion (looking for the agency-over-communion effect in self-evaluation). The other half of participants were asked to the same rating an acquaintance and we expected that global evaluation of the acquaintance would be better predicted from ratings of communal than agentic traits (showing the communion-over-agency effect typical for evaluation of other people).

In a multi-sample study 2 we sought for replication of the agency-over-communion effect (in self-evaluations) using six different measures of self-esteem and samples varying in age, gender, and character to eliminate several explanations alternative to those offered by the DPM. All these studies replicated the agency-over-communion effect. To look for limits of this effect, we conducted study 3 where we measured subjective importance of agentic and communal traits. We explored whether the agency-over-communion effect is constrained to persons believing agency to be more important than communion or whether it also extends to those who believe the opposite.

STUDY 1

In this study, we tested the basic hypothesis that self-ascribed agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion. Additionally, we tested a complementary prediction that communal qualities ascribed to other persons would be a stronger predictor of their global evaluations (parallel to self-esteem) than other-ascribed agency. Therefore we asked a half of our participants to fill in a measure of self-ascribed agency and communion, as well as a self-esteem measure. Another half participants filled in the same questionnaires as if referring to another specific person—a distant acquaintance.

Method

Participants

The participants were 62 high school students (age 18 or 19, 29 girls and 34 boys) randomly assigned to the self-description ($N = 32$) or other-description ($N = 30$) condition. In the latter, participants were asked to describe an acquaintance of the same sex (not a close friend).

Measures of Agency and Communion

A short self-description questionnaire was devised to measure self ascribed agency and communion. The questionnaire included seven agentic traits (Clever, Competent, Efficient, Energetic, Intelligent, Knowledgeable, Logical) and seven communal traits (Fair, Good-natured, Honest, Loyal, Selfless, Sincere, Truthful). The index was the average ratings of each

subset of the traits. The traits were carefully balanced for favourability and their agency versus communion relatedness. The average favourability of the agentic traits was 4.09, for communal traits the average was 4.21 (both on a scale ranging from -5 to 0 to 5 ; rated by 19 raters, cf. Wojciszke, Dowhyluk, & Jaworski, 1998). Self-ratings of traits were given on scales ranging from 1 (*definitely doesn't apply to me*) to 7 (*definitely applies to me*). Principal component analyses performed on these ratings typically revealed two dominant (or sole) factors, one corresponding to agency, the other corresponding to communion. Reliabilities of the agency scale varied in different samples as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Measure of Self-Esteem

Rosenberg's (1965) classical self-esteem scale was used with 1–5 answering system (including a neutral "3" value which was originally not included by Rosenberg). This scale (previously adapted to the Polish language) showed a satisfactory reliability with Cronbach's α varying typically around .80. In the other-description condition the self-esteem scale was reworded in a way enabling global evaluation of another person. So, the original items like "I take a positive attitude toward myself" or "At times I think I am no good at all" were changed to "I take a positive attitude toward him (or her)" or "At times I think he (she) is no good at all".

Results and Discussion

Agency Versus Communion as Predictors of Self-Esteem

When agency, communion, and condition ($1 = \text{self}$, $-1 = \text{other}$) and their interactions were entered as predictors of self-esteem (or a global evaluation in the other-perception condition), the interaction of all three variables was significant, $\beta = .29$, $p = .009$, along with main effects of agency and communion, the β s being .26 and .30. To decompose this interaction, we performed similar regression analyzes for the self- and other-perceptions separately. As can be seen in Table 1, the perceived communion more strongly predicted global evaluations of the other person than perceived agency. This is in line with the substantial amount of data showing the communion-over-agency effect in cognition of others, as

Table 1. Distributions of agency and communion measures, and regression of self-esteem on agency and communion in Study 1

	Distribution		Regression		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (model)	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	β
Self-description			5.60**	.23	
Agency (.61)	5.31	0.68			.54**
Communion (.84)	5.89	0.83			-.04
<i>t</i>	3.86***				
Other-description			20.57***	.57	
Agency (.85)	4.56	1.15			.16
Communion (.91)	4.20	1.33			.66***
<i>t</i>	2.00*				

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Distributions of agency and communion measures, and regression of self-esteem on agency and communion in five samples of Study 2

Sample	Distribution		Regression		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (model)	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	<i>β</i>
Sample 1					
Dependent: self-liking			54.42***	.39	
Agency (.90)	4.88	0.87			.63***
Communion (.88)	5.46	0.66			-.01
<i>t</i>	7.53***				
Dependent: self-competence			67.25***	.44	
Agency (.92)	4.88	0.87			.67***
Communion (.88)	5.46	0.66			.00
<i>t</i>	7.53***				
Sample 2					
Dependent: implicit self-esteem			7.29**	.13	
Agency (.71)	37.73	21.41			.38***
Communion (.79)	48.60	19.99			-.05
<i>t</i>	4.20***				
Sample 3					
Dependent: state self-esteem			19.88***	.30	
Agency (.87)	5.48	0.73			.61***
Communion (.88)	5.76	0.82			-.13
<i>t</i>	3.86***				
Sample 4					
Dependent: Narcissism			18.57***	.18	
Agency (.80)	5.12	0.76			.45***
Communion (.86)	5.52	0.82			-.06
<i>t</i>	5.54***				
Sample 5					
Dependent: trait self-esteem			8.18***	.22	
Agency (.79)	5.76	0.71			.45**
Communion (.81)	6.32	0.72			.11
<i>t</i>	5.18***				

p* < .01. *p* < .001.

reviewed in the introduction. However, for the self-perception the opposite effect of agency-over-communion was found, in line with the original predictions of DPM.

The Muhammad Ali Effect and Ceiling Effects

As can be seen in the initial columns of Table 1 (and Table 2), our participants ascribed to themselves significantly more communion than agency. This finding resembles the Muhammad-Ali effect—a tendency to perceive oneself as moral to a higher degree than others (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989). Strictly, the Muhammad Ali effect is an interpersonal comparison phenomenon involving self-other differences in the perception of morality. However, usually these interpersonal differences are also accompanied by an intra-individual tendency to rate one's own morality higher than one's own ability (Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). Provided the self-ratings of communion are higher than self-ratings of agency, an obvious explanation of the lack of correlation between communion and self-esteem would be in terms of a ceiling effect: Maybe people self-ascribe communion to such a high degree, that there is lack of variability and, therefore, lack of its co-variability with anything else, including self-esteem. A similar methodological explanation could be offered in terms of a restricted range of communion judgments: Maybe

the ascription of communion is restricted to positive judgments while ascriptions of agency include both negative and positive judgments making them more influential with respect to global evaluative responses. However, in none of the samples was the variance of communion significantly smaller than the variance of agency-ascription (*cf.* standard deviations showed in Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, in all samples the average communal self-ascriptions were more than one standard deviation below the maximum score, rendering the explanation in terms of the ceiling effect implausible. Finally, in each sample, nearly all individual self-ratings of *both* agency and communion were clearly positive and we failed to find a curvilinear relation between communion and self-esteem in any of the samples. This renders the differential range of judgment variability an implausible explanation of the present agency-over-communion effect.

Summary

The initial study revealed that self-ascribed agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion and the opposite is true for other-perception. Both these effects are consistent with our DPM of the relative importance of basic dimensions of social cognition. The alternative explanation for the obtained results in terms of agency-

communion differences in the variation range of self-judgments appeared not viable.

STUDY 2

Another explanation of the agency-over-communion pattern may refer to age and age-related life tasks. In study 1 young students participated, 18–19 in age. Because learning and studying is the main task of this age group in our culture (Finney, Pieper, & Barron, 2004), the importance of agency may be temporarily inflated—young students may be preoccupied with own agency to such a degree that they ignore communal qualities and do not care about them in their self-esteem. Therefore, along with two student samples we studied also three samples of young and medium-age adults.

Another alternative explanation may refer to gender. It is well known that communal qualities constitute the stereotype of femininity (Glick & Fiske, 2001), while agentic qualities make up the stereotype of masculinity (Glick et al., 2004). Assuming that people base their self-esteem on qualities they identify with, it can be predicted that the present agency-over-communion pattern would be observed mostly or solely among men due to their agentic self-stereotype. Due to the small sample size, this explanation could not be tested in a proper way in study 1. Since the present study involves larger samples of both men and women, the role of gender can be explored in a systematic way.

Yet another alternative explanation is possible in terms of qualities of self-esteem measures. Some studies found the classical Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to have two-factorial structure with one factor referring to competence and the other referring to pure self-liking (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002). If the self-esteem measure is strongly saturated with competence, then, of course, the present agency-over-communion effect is circular and results from dependent and independent variables measuring the same phenomenon. Therefore, in one of the present samples we measured self-competence and self-liking separately. In other samples we used various measures of self-esteem (state self-esteem scale of Heatherton & Polivy, 1991, or narcissistic personality inventory of Raskin & Hall, 1979), including measures which keep-out self-competence, like the name letter preference (e.g., Koole, Govorun, Cheng, & Gallucci, 2009). The latter index involves preference of letters constituting one's own initials and is an implicit measure of self-esteem because participants do not think consciously about themselves while it is being taken (they just rate their liking of consecutive letters of the alphabet). We also varied the measures of self-ascribed agency and communion, as described in the method section. To summarize, the present study tested the basic agency-over-communion effect in five replications with substantial changes in methods and samples studied to eliminate several alternative explanations of this effect.

Method

Participants

Five samples differing in age were recruited. Sample 1 consisted of 170 students (129 women, 41 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.56$, $SD = 2.92$) and Sample 2 consisted of equally young 88

students (67 women, 15 men). Sample 3 included 90 employees (49 women, 41 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.46$, $SD = 8.80$). Sample 4 consisted of 162 Polish employees of an international, very competitive corporation (92 women, 70 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 25.43$, $SD = 3.23$). Finally, Sample 5 included 53 state clerks who were a generation older and could be hardly suspected of competitiveness and preoccupation with competence (28 women, 25 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 47.35$, $SD = 8.70$).

Measures of Self-Esteem

In Sample 1, self-liking and self-competence were measured, each with 10 items translated and adapted from Tafarodi and Milne (2002). In the present sample both scales appeared highly consistent ($\alpha = .92$ for self-liking, $\alpha = .82$ for self-competence). Although the two scales were strongly correlated ($r = .73$, $p < .001$), a factor analysis with oblimin rotation showed two separate factors (self-liking explained 36.88% of variance and self-competence 20% of variance). In Sample 2 participants rated all letters of the Polish alphabet for liking on a scale ranging from 1 (I strongly dislike the letter) to 1 (I strongly like the letter). At the end of the study participants were asked to write down their initials. The self-esteem measure was the average liking of initial letters ipsatized and standardized over the whole sample. In Sample 3, the State Self-Esteem Scale of Heatherton and Polivy (1991) was used—translated and adapted in previous studies. In the present sample its internal consistency was satisfactory ($\alpha = .79$). In Sample 4, we used a previously translated and adapted Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979) which showed a good reliability ($\alpha = .91$). Finally, in Sample 5, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used ($\alpha = .83$).

Measures of Agency and Communion

In Samples 3–5, self-ascribed agency and communion was measured in the same way as in Study 1. In Sample 1, agency and communion were measured with 15 items (adjectives) each. Because previous research showed that morality may function in a different way than other communal subdimensions (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007), we selected 15 communal items without a strong moral meaning (Agreeable, Caring, Compassionate, Compliant, Considerate, Friendly, Forgiving, Helpful, Kind, Self-sacrificing, Sensitive to others, Supportive, Tolerant, Trustworthy, and Understanding) as well as 15 agentic items. These items were selected from a pool of 300 trait names (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, Study 1) pre-rated for communion-relatedness, agency-relatedness and global favorability on -5 to 0 to 5 scales. The two sets of items were balanced for favorability (both means were 3.67). Whereas the communal items were much more related to communion ($M = 4.11$) than agency ($M = 1.01$), the opposite was true for the agentic items ($M_{\text{agency}} = 4.22$ and $M_{\text{communion}} = 1.30$). In Sample 2, each of the two dimensions was measured with 10 positive and 10 negative adjectives and the difference between the sums of positives and negatives served as an index of self-ascription. The reliabilities of these measures are given in Table 2.

Results and Discussion

Agency Versus Communion as Predictors of Self-Esteem

To test the basic prediction that self-ascribed agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion we regressed self-esteem on these two measures in a simultaneous linear regression, like in the previous study. As can be seen in Table 2, the whole regression model was highly significant in each sample. Moreover, in each sample self-ascribed agency proved a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion. The first order correlations between self-ascriptions and self-esteem (for all studies) are reported in Table 4 and discussed later.

Age and Gender

This basic pattern was replicated in each sample for both genders and gender did not interact with agency nor communion in any sample. In none of the samples gender conformed to the stereotype-based expectation that agency would be a stronger predictor of self-esteem among men than women (similarly see Abele, 2003). This is in line with recent meta-analyses showing no systematic gender differences in self-esteem in agentic and communal areas (Gentile et al., 2009). Although men show a bit higher self-esteem than women in the athletic domain, there is no difference in the academic self-esteem. Similarly, women show a slightly higher self-esteem in morality but not in the social acceptance domain. Neither age played any difference. It is especially instructive to compare Samples 4 and 5. The former consisted of young employees of a highly competitive international corporation, the latter included one generation older state clerks and bureaucracy in Poland is known for its structural disregard of efficiency and competence (*cf.* Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). Still, in both self-esteem was more strongly correlated with beliefs in own agency than communion, as predicted by the present Dual-Perspective Model. When the self perspective is involved, agency becomes a more important consideration in evaluations than communion.

Self-liking and Self-Competence

The agency-over-communion pattern was found independently of the self-esteem measure, though each sample used a different one, as shown in Table 2. Most tellingly, agency influenced self-liking even when self-competence was controlled in a hierarchical analysis of regression. In the first step, we regressed self-liking on self-competence, which resulted in a strong $\beta = .73$, $t(168) = 13.62$, $p < .001$. In the second step, we included also self-ascribed agency and communion, which resulted in a significant change, $F(2, 167) = 7.11$, $p = .001$ (additional .036 of R^2). At this step self-competence remained a strong predictor of liking, $\beta = .55$, $t(165) = 7.96$, $p < .001$ and agency was significant as well, $\beta = .26$, $t(165) = 3.76$, $p < .001$. Communion, however, remained an insignificant predictor of self-liking, $\beta = -.01$, $t < 1$. We read this as an unequivocal support for our prediction that self-esteem is more strongly based on agentic than

communal considerations. This remains true even when the self-esteem measure is void of competence (like the letter preference measure in Sample 2) or self-competence is carefully controlled, like in the present Sample 1.

STUDY 3

All studies reported so far yielded consistent results showing that self-esteem is more strongly predicted from self-ascribed agency than communion (and Study 1 showed the opposite is true for other-perception). To test the limits of this effect we performed the present study where we repeated the procedure of measuring agentic and communal self-ascriptions and global self-esteem and asked participants additionally how important was each of the traits for them personally. On this basis we divided our participants into two groups—those believing agency to be more important than communion and those believing the opposite. We wanted to explore whether the agency-over-communion effect extends also to those persons who subjectively declare greater importance of communal traits for their self-esteem.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 182 students (100 women, 82 men, ranging in age from 19 to 22).

Measures of Agency, Communion, and Self-Esteem

The self-ascribed agency and communion were measured with 15 items (adjectives) each, like in Sample 1 of Study 2. The measures showed high reliabilities (Cronbach's α was .89 for both communion and agency). Self-esteem was measured with Rosenberg's scale ($\alpha = .88$). At the end of the study participants received the list of traits once more and rated their personal importance on a scale ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important for me). Because the importance ratings appeared highly reliable for both agentic ($\alpha = .93$) and communal ($\alpha = .92$) traits, we averaged the two sets and computed mean importance ratings of agentic and communal traits. The difference between the two means served as the criterion to divide the sample into those who considered communal traits more important than agentic ones or the opposite.

Results and Discussion

To test the basic prediction that self-ascribed agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion, we regressed self-esteem on these two measures in a simultaneous linear regression, like in the previous studies. As can be seen in Table 3 (Model 1), the whole regression model was highly significant and self-ascribed agency once more proved a strong predictor of self-esteem, while self-ascribed

Table 3. Different regression models for agency and communion as predictors of self-esteem in Study 3

	<i>F</i> (model)	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	<i>β</i>
The whole sample			
Model 1.	25.60***	.21	
Agency			.47***
Communion			.01
Model 2.	13.68***	.22	
Agency			.42***
Communion			.08
Agency x importance			-.31*
Communion x importance			.22
Divided by importance			
Agency more important	15.32***	.31	
Agency			.57***
Communion			-.02
Communion more important	5.79**	.09	
Agency			.28**
Communion			.11

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

communion did not predict self-esteem. In Model 2, we introduced the interaction terms involving importance, that is, the products of agency by importance and communion by importance. As shown in Table 3, the introduction of interactions increased the amount of variance explained by only .01 adjusted *R*² and this increase failed to reach significance, $F(2, 177) = 1.58$, $p = .208$. Nevertheless, the agency by importance interaction was marginally significant, $\beta = -.31$, $p = .089$. As can be seen in lower panels of Table 3, this marginal interaction meant that the agency-over communion effect was slightly more pronounced among the participants who considered agentic traits to be more important ($N = 66$) than among those who considered communal traits to be more important ($N = 104$). Still, even among the latter, self-ascribed agency remained the sole significant predictor of self-esteem. Interestingly, only this group ascribed to themselves more communion ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.61$) than agency ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(103) = 10.50$, $p < .001$. The participants believing agency to be more important ascribed to themselves slightly more agentic ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.78$) than communal ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.77$) traits, but this tendency was only marginally significant, $t(65) = 1.57$, $p = .06$.

To conclude, these findings suggest that verbal declarations of trait importance significantly influenced the declared self-assessment of traits, but they did not influence the analytical importance of the trait-ascriptions as indicated by their weight as self-esteem predictors. Even among participants believing in greater importance of communal than agentic traits only the self-ascribed agency served as a significant predictor of self-esteem.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Summary of the Findings

The present studies repeatedly showed that self-ascribed agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion. This predicted pattern emerged consistently over the studies regardless of the participants' age and gender and despite variation in specific content of self-ascriptions and in spite of using six measures of self-esteem (self-esteem as a trait or as a state, self-liking, self-competence, narcissism, and preference for own initials). This is not to say that the self-ascribed communion does not relate to self-esteem at all. To estimate the strength of relations between self-ascriptions and self-esteem in a more comprehensive way, we performed a meta-analysis (Rosenthal, 1991) of the 8 pairs of relevant correlations obtained in the present studies. As can be seen in Table 4, the weighted average correlation between communion and self-esteem was small, but significant, $r = .11$, $z = 2.82$, $p = .0024$. However, this correlation was very weak and insignificant in most samples. The correlation of agency with self-esteem was much stronger on the average, $r = .49$, $z = 15.15$, $p < .0001$, and it emerged consistently in all cases.

This difference remains in stark contrast with evaluations of other people, that are more influenced by communal than agentic considerations, as shown by study 1 as well as by other experiments (De Bruin & Van Lange, 1999; Wojciszke, Bazinska & Jaworski, 1998). Still, the whole pattern of findings is in perfect agreement with our DPM assuming the dominance of agency in self-evaluation and the dominance of communion in evaluation of others. The present findings and the underlying theoretical model are original because no other theory allows a

Table 4. Meta-analysis of correlations (Pearson's *r*) between self-ascribed agency, communion, and self-esteem

	Agency self-esteem (1)	Communion self-esteem (2)	Agency communion (3)	<i>z</i> difference (1)-(2)
Study 1	.53***	.16	.37*	2.00*
Study 2				
Sample 1	.63***	.09	.16*	6.39***
Sample 2	.38***	-.03	.05	2.84**
Sample 3	.55***	.16	.47***	4.01***
Sample 4	.43***	.08	.32***	4.06***
Sample 5	.49***	.28*	.38***	1.51 ^a
Study 3				
Agency important	.57***	.04	.11	3.59***
Communion important	.30***	.17*	.21*	1.06
Weighted average <i>r</i>	.49	.11	.25	
<i>z</i> (average)	15.15	2.82	7.21	
<i>p</i> (average)	.0001	.0024	.0001	

^a*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

prediction of agency over communion dominance. Although a few similar empirical findings can be found, they were not interpreted as theoretically meaningful, as discussed later. Both these tendencies (primacy of agency in self-esteem and primacy of communion in evaluation of others) can be parsimoniously explained by the rules of motivated social cognition (Kunda, 1999) and the well-supported idea that communal qualities are motivationally more relevant than agentic ones in the action recipient perspective, while the opposite is true in the agentic perspective, applied typically to the self and close or interdependent others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). Agency and communion are basic dimensions of content but which of the two dominates the other is not an invariant, since it depends on the perspective from which evaluations are being made.

Alternative Explanations

Throughout this research we put much effort to testing and eliminating many alternative explanations of the agency-over-communion effect in self-evaluations. The simplest explanation of why self-esteem is more related to agency than communion would be in terms of lower variability of the latter judgments. However, this appeared not to be the case—we found no significant differences in variability in any of the samples studied. We also did not find a curvilinear relation between communion and self-esteem in any of the studies. Yet another explanation could involve a confound between self-competence beliefs and general self-esteem. However, the basic pattern kept well also when the measure of self-esteem controlled for this possible confound (i.e., pertained to self-liking with control for self-competence) or involved no competence component, like the letter-preference measure used in sample 2 of study 2. Similarly, there were no differences involving age and gender which could support another alternative explanations. Even subjective beliefs that communal qualities are more important than agentic ones did not reverse the agency-over-communion pattern in self-evaluations.

If an effect is invariably found in every sample coming from the same culture, then, of course, the culture may be the reason. Assuming the culture is individualistic, the pattern of agency-over-communion in self-esteem may be explained in terms of the cultural emphasis on the individualized self and individualistic values, or stress on personal goals and strivings accompanied by a neglect of communal considerations, so typical for individualistic cultures (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeir, 2002) and people of a primed independent-self (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). However, Wojciszke and Abele (2010) found the agency-over-communion effect in extremely individualistic (Britain, The Netherlands, USA), moderately individualistic (Germany), moderately collectivistic (Poland), or extremely collectivistic samples (China, Colombia, Japan).

Sociometer Theory

One of the most popular accounts of self-esteem is the sociometer theory developed by Leary (2005; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). According to this theory, self-esteem is

basically an internal device gauging the level of current social acceptance received from others, a device serving the function of an alarm system which warns of decreases in the acceptance level and signals the danger of incoming social rejection. In effect, the theory assumes that people are not motivated to strive for positive self-esteem per se, but rather “seek to increase their relational value and social acceptance, using self-esteem as a gauge of their effectiveness” (Leary, 2005, p. 75). On the surface, the DPM and the present results seem to be discrepant with the sociometer theory, as it is logical to assume that social acceptance is based on communal rather than agentic qualities. However, a recent meta-analysis showed that although social acceptance increases self-esteem, social rejection does not generally decrease self-esteem compared to neutral conditions (Blackhart et al., 2009) and it is not that clear whether the rejection is based on communal or agentic considerations. In a majority of 13 studies on rejection effects on self-esteem reviewed by Leary (2005), the actual or imagined rejection experienced by participants pertained probably to agency rather than communion. One important manipulation consists of informing people conversing in five-person groups that the rest of the group rejected them, so they would end up working solo rather than in a next three-person group (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995, Study 3). Since the upcoming task was defined as dealing with “decision-making problems” the rejection was probably construed in agentic terms and the same applies to other social rejection procedures, like receiving evaluations from a professor or other members of a task group (*cf.* Leary, 2005). Of course, this does not hurt the sociometer theory, as this account predicts similar effects of social exclusion whatever the reasons for an exclusion are. Our point is simply that social rejection should not be equated with the rejection based on communal deficiencies, because there are many different reasons for social rejection including reasons based on agentic considerations. In effect, the discrepancy between our DPM and the sociometer theory is rather apparent than real.

Actually, our data are similar to some results inspired by sociometer theory, though we explain them in a different way. For example, MacDonald, Saltzman, and Leary (2003) asked their participants for specific evaluations of their competence, physical attractiveness, material possessions, sociability, and morality and then used these evaluations as self-esteem predictors in a simultaneous regression analysis. Whereas competence was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .27$), sociability was a weak and only marginally significant predictor ($\beta = .13$), and morality did not predict self-esteem at all ($\beta = -.02$). The weak influence of sociability was not commented, while the lack of influence of morality was explained as an effect of the interpersonal friction and conflict presumably resulting from standing by own morals. We can offer here a more comprehensive explanation in terms of a generally low weight of communal antecedents of self-esteem.

Caveats

All the present studies are correlational which raises the obvious question of causation. This question was addressed by Wojciszke and Sobiczewska (2010) who manipulated the

accessibility of positive or negative information on agentic or communal functioning asking their participants to recall appropriate episodes from their life. Self-esteem was significantly higher after recalling successes than failures, but it was not influenced by recalling a norm-maintenance versus norm-breaking behavior (communal priming). However, global evaluations of another person were influenced by both agentic and communal priming. We read this finding as an experimental replication of the correlation data reported in the present paper.

Yet another caveat concerns the generality of the present agency-over-communion effect. Like any other effect, it is probably valid only within some boundary conditions. Probably an actor focuses on agency (on getting things done) mainly in the volitional mindset, when an action is being performed (*cf.* Achtziger & Gollwitzer, 2010). When the action is considered from a temporal distance (i.e., when planning or evaluating the action long after its completion) the action's communal meaning may acquire more importance and influence self-esteem to a higher degree. Looking for such boundary conditions is an important venue of research on the agency-over-communion effect evidenced for the first time in the present work.

The self-esteem literature is, of course, much broader than the present work permits to discuss. Especially, we were unable to cover the rich theorizing on the contingencies of self-esteem—the idea that people base their self-esteem on selected domains of activity and pursue (sometimes to substantial costs) their self-worth only in these domains by attempting to validate and increase their relevant qualities. Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) empirically distinguished seven domains on which self-worth of college students may be contingent (according to students' declarations). Among those students who declared their self-worth to be contingent on academic achievements, information on educational failure or success led to corresponding changes in daily self-esteem (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003). It remains to be seen whether similar changes in self-esteem would result from objectively measured (not only declared) outcomes in communal domains, such as virtue or approval from other people. The present theorizing suggests a negative answer and the same is suggested by the scarce data on the topic. Abele (2003) measured agentic and communal orientations among nearly two thousand students graduating from their universities and assessed their occupational and relation-building outcomes 18 months later. Both orientations predicted the appropriate outcomes (agency–occupational, communal–relation-building), but the reciprocal influence of outcomes on orientations (reassessed at the second wave of the study) was found only for the agentic orientation and outcomes.

We do not intend to say that all theorizing on self-esteem contingencies should be reduced to the two domains of agency and communion. Rather, we believe that both fine-grained and more general approaches to the same problem have their own merits impossible to be provided by the other approach. In this work we took a more general approach trying to connect theorizing on the two content dimensions of social cognition with the self-esteem and its antecedents. It seems that the basic dimensions of agency and communion have, indeed, something new to say about self-esteem as well.

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