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8 Agency and communion are inferred from actions serving interests 9 of self or others

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13 Abstract

14 *Agentic qualities are associated with self-interests of the trait possessor and communal qualities are associated with*
15 *interests of other people (with whom the trait possessor interacts with). Based on this idea we hypothesized that*
16 *information on behavior serving self-interests leads to inferences of agency while information on identical actions*
17 *performed in the service of others' interests leads to inferences of communion. These hypotheses were supported in a study*
18 *where participants perceived a politician who acted for or against his own interest and (orthogonally) acted for or against*
19 *interests of other people. Additionally, actions serving other-interest influenced attitudes toward the politician to a higher*
20 *degree than actions serving his self-interest. The other-interest influence on attitudes was mediated by inferences of*
21 *communal qualities of the politician while the self-interest influence on attitudes was mediated by inferences of agentic*
22 *qualities of the politician. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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30 There is an emerging agreement among researchers that two basic content dimensions underlie social judgments. One of
31 them is referred to under the names communion, warmth, or morality and pertains to functioning in social relations
32 involving qualities like warmth, helpfulness, honesty, cooperation, and trustworthiness (and their opposites). The other—
33 called competence or agency—pertains to task functioning and goal achievement involving qualities like efficiency,
34 competence, persistence, and energy (and their opposites). These two dimensions play a crucial role in construal of
35 everyday behavior and impression formation (Wojciszke, 1994) including perceptions of political and organizational
36 leaders (Kinder & Sears, 1985; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). They also constitute two basic dimensions of group perceptions
37 as assumed by the stereotype content model (SCM) (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). These two dimensions are
38 independent and predict systematic differences in emotions and behaviors directed at the stereotyped groups (Cuddy,
39 Fiske, & Glick, 2007).

40 41 42 43 WHAT ARE THE BASES TO INFER AGENCY AND COMMUNION? 44

45 Provided universality of these two types of content, it is important to ask how they are inferred. What are the bases people
46 use to decide whether a person (a group) is agentic/competent or not and whether she is communal/warm or not?

47 Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2007) answer these questions in a functionalist way: when intentions are good for the
48 perceiver, the target is perceived as warm/communal, but when intentions are malicious, the target is perceived as lacking
49 these qualities. On the other side, when targets are seen as able to enact their intentions they are perceived as competent/
50 agentic. According to this account, the first dimension is about setting goals, as viewed from the perceiver's perspective,
51 and the second dimension is about efficiency of goal attainment. Because both benevolent and malicious intentions may be

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completed in an efficient or inefficient way, the two dimensions are mutually independent. A straightforward prediction is that judgments of agency/competence are based on the efficiency of goal attainment, whatever the goal could be. Indeed, self-ascribed agency increases after successful completion of an experimental task (Abele, Rupperecht, & Wojciszke, 2008) or achievement of professional success in real life (Abele, 2003). Yet another prediction resulting from the functionalist account is that judgments of communion are based on whether the target's goals are beneficial or detrimental to the perceiver. This was supported by a study on attitudes toward a political candidate whose program was either beneficial or harmful for the retired persons. Judgments of his communion (moral integrity) heavily depended on this program for the retired participants, but not for the control participants who were law students (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2006).

However, there is more to judgments of agency based on the efficiency of goal attainment and judgments of communion based on the goal setting. The SCM implies additional bases of warmth and competence inferences because it builds on a social structural hypothesis assuming that stereotypes result from structural relations between groups in a way which justifies and perpetuates the *status quo*. This leads to a prediction that the perception of groups as competent or incompetent follows from their high or low position in the status hierarchy because such perceptions sustain legitimacy to the social system. Those who occupy higher positions are seen as competent and deserve their fate, as do those who occupy lower positions because they lack competence. Indeed, a variety of studies showed very high correlation between the group status and its perceived competence (Cuddy et al., 2007, [in press](#)^{Q2}; Fiske et al., 2002). The status/competence correlation is very strong as competence is typically necessary to acquire high status positions; experimental studies show that highly competent persons are perceived as having a strong potential to acquire positions of high status (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2007).

Based on the same social structural hypothesis, the SCM also predicts that the perception of groups as warm results from their benevolence, that is, their lack of competition against the perceivers' own group. In support of this hypothesis, the mentioned studies of Fiske, Cuddy, and their colleagues found correlations between perceived group benevolence and perceived warmth. Interestingly, recent research shows that these social structural premises shape perceptions of individuals as well (Russell & Fiske, 2008). Individuals of high status are perceived as more competent than low status persons even if they show an identical level of efficiency. Similarly, individuals met in a cooperative interaction are perceived as more communal than those met in a competitive context, even if both show identical behavior. Although perceivers think they judge personality of target individuals, their perceptions are actually influenced by social structure. Competence is inferred from status and communion is inferred from the cooperative structure of interaction.

PRESENT RESEARCH

In present research we want to pursue yet another kind of basis for interpersonal judgments—whether the perceived action serves interests of the agent (the person who performs a behavior) or interests of others (recipients of the action in question). The same action may serve either self- or other-interest, be it a dramatic act, like rescuing a person from a house on fire, or a mundane one like repairing a car. Although actions serving interests of self and others may be identical in their character, efficiency, and any other respect, we hypothesize that they will be perceived in divergent ways. Our prediction is that acts successfully serving self-interest will increase judgments of agentic but not communal qualities, while identical acts serving other-interest will increase judgments of communal but not agentic qualities of the acting person. When Adam ingeniously fixes his own car, he is perceived as skillful, but when he fixes Mark's car he is perceived as helpful.

These hypotheses are based on the fact that frequently the same behavioral act is amenable to different interpretations (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977) which may vary in the abstraction level (Trope & Liberman, 2003) and the descriptive content (Wojciszke, 1994). The hypotheses are derived from the double interest account of differences between agentic and communal categories in social perception. According to this account, agentic categories denote interests of an acting person, while communal categories reflect interests of others who are recipients of the action in question (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005). In other words, communal qualities are other-profitable because other people (i.e., action recipients, the perceiver included) directly benefit from such traits like kindness, helpfulness, or honesty and are harmed by their opposites (Peeters, 1983). In the same 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) which showed that

the more a trait pertains to agency (e.g., efficient or intelligent), the more it is perceived as serving interests of the trait possessor, but not interests of others. The more a trait pertains to communion (e.g., helpful or honest), the more it is perceived as serving interests of others, but not interests of the trait possessor. If agency is associated with acting for self-interest, then behavior serving this interest will be construed in agentic terms, leading to inferences of agentic attributes of the actor. If communion is associated with acting for other-interest, then behavior serving this interest will be construed in communal terms, leading to inferences of communal qualities of the actor.

To test these hypotheses we devised vignettes introducing a target person who was a political candidate in a parliamentary elections and who performed two lines of actions: line A was relevant for his own interests and line B was relevant for interests of surrounding others, the politician's constituency. To disentangle the predicted effects from the specific action content, for half the participants the description was reversed (line A served other-interest and line B served self-interest). Because actions relevant for both the self- and other-interests were either successful or not, the basic design was 2 (acting for vs. against own interest) \times 2 (acting for vs. against interest of others). After reading the vignettes participants were asked to rate several traits of the politician (pertaining to agency or communion), demonstrate global attitudes toward the politician, and indicate their intentions to vote for him. This allowed us to test three additional hypotheses. First, actions serving other-interests influence global attitudes to a higher degree than actions serving self-interests because the former refer to the interests of constituency (and our participants probably identify themselves with constituency rather than with the politician in question). Second, the other-interest influence on global attitudes is mediated by inferences of communal qualities of the politician. Finally, self-interest influence on global attitudes is mediated by inferences of agentic qualities of the politician.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Participants were 133 students of Warsaw University, Poland. Their age ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = 20.85$); 98 were women and 35 men. Each of them received mock press clippings introducing a fictitious politician and his two lines of actions (A and B), where one was harmful or beneficial to his own self-interest and the other action was harmful or beneficial to interests of other people. The basic design was 2 other-interest (for vs. against) \times 2 self-interest (for vs. against) \times 2 material version (line A referred to the self-interest, line B referred to other-interest vs. line A referred to other-interest, line B referred to self-interest).

Materials

Information about the target person was provided in the form of (mock) newspaper clippings which described A. Kowalewski, a non-existing local politician starting his campaign to the Polish Parliament. Two lines of action were described, one serving self-interests and another serving other-interest. The first line of action depicted the politician as a business owner who managed the firm well and successfully invested his money (the "for" self-interest condition) or as a businessman who managed the firm poorly and lost money in failing investments (the "against" self-interest condition). The second line of action pertained to his performance as an executive of a foundation belonging to the town. The target ran the foundation either with success, frequently appearing on TV and establishing valuable connections (the "for" other-interest condition) or he managed the foundation neglectfully and behaved in a ruthless way (the "against" other-interest condition). To disentangle the effects of specific interest from the specific action content, for half the participants the description was reversed, that is, the politician's actions in the business context were presented as shown in the foundation context while his action in the foundation context were presented as shown in the firm context.

An initial version of the materials was presented to a pilot group of 40 students not included in the main study who rated the descriptions for whether the politician acted for or against the interests of others (his potential voters) as well as whether he acted for or against his own interest. Informed by these ratings we formulated the final version of materials

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between attitude, voting intention, perceived agency and perceived communion

	Mean	SD	r_{2Q3}	3.	4.
1. Attitude	3.72	1.20	.78***	.32***	.74***
2. Voting	3.45	1.49		.33***	.63***
3. Agency	4.63	0.98			.05
4. Communion	3.83	1.16			

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

which appropriately conveyed information about the target actions in respect of self- and other-interests, as evidenced by the manipulation checks reported below.

Measures

Voting Intention

Participants were asked to rate their intention to vote for the candidate on a seven-point scale (from 1—*definitely not* to 7—*definitely yes*) and to estimate the country's expected benefit from his election (on a similar scale). These two ratings were highly correlated ($r = .91$) and they were averaged into a single voting intention index.

Politician Evaluations

Respondents were asked to rate the politician on several seven-point scales. Six items measured the global attitude: "I like him, I have warm feelings about him, I feel close to him, He deserves admiration, He deserves respect, He could serve as an example to others," (Cronbach's $a = .90$). Five items measured perceived agency (clever, determined, dominant, persistent, and wise, $a = .78$) and five items measured perceived communion (considerate, friendly, honest, moral, and supportive, $a = .89$). Descriptive statistics of these measures and their correlations are given in Table 1.

Manipulation Check

To check the efficiency of the experimental manipulations, the two last questions were asked. Did the politician act for his own interests and did he act for interests of other people? Both questions were answered on eleven-point scales ranging from -5 (*definitely against*) to 0 (*hard to say*) to 5 (*definitely for*).

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

To check the manipulation we performed an analysis of variance on the perceived acting for interest of self and others, as a function of the manipulated self-interest (for vs. against), of the manipulated other-interest (for vs. against) and the version of materials (behavior line A referred to self-interest, line B referred to other-interest vs. line A referred to other-interest, line B referred to self-interest). The politician introduced as acting for his own interests was indeed perceived as such ($M = 3.32$), while the politician introduced as acting against his interest was really perceived by our participants as doing so ($M = -2.03$) and this difference was very large, $\eta^2 = .80$. Similarly, the politician introduced as acting for interests of other people was really perceived as such ($M = 3.61$) while the politician introduced as acting against those interests was

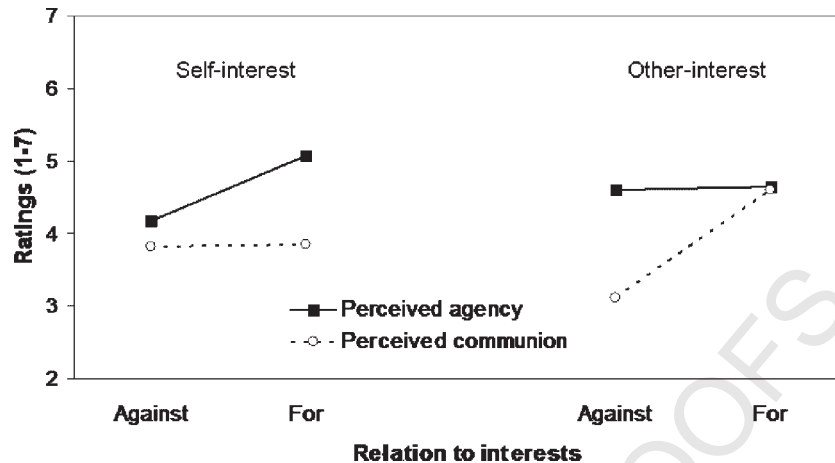


Figure 1. Inferences of agency and communion as a function of the target's actions for interests of self versus others

indeed perceived as doing so ($M = -2.09$) and this difference was also very large, $\eta^2 = .86$. Perceptions of the two interests were slightly correlated, $r(132) = .16, p = .07$. The version of the materials had no effect: The perceived acting for self-interest did not depend on whether behavior line A or B served this interest, and the same was true for the perceived other-interest ($F_s < 1.7$). Therefore the version of materials was dropped as a separate factor in further analyses.

Perceived Agency and Communion

Ratings of perceived qualities of the politician were subjected to a 2 (self-interest: for vs. against) \times 2 (other-interest: for vs. against) \times 2 (content: agency vs. communion) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the last factor. All three main effects appeared significant: perceptions of agency were higher than those of communion; perceptions of the politician acting for others' interests were higher than those of the one acting against other-interest, and perceptions of the politician acting for his own interest were higher than those of the one acting against self-interest. However, none of these effects was interpretable due to the two predicted interactions which appeared significant as well.

First of them was the interaction between self-interest and the perception content, $F(1, 129) = 17.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. As shown in the left panel of Figure 1, persons acting for their own interests were perceived as more agentic ($M = 5.07, SD = 0.78$) than those acting against their interests ($M = 4.18, SD = 0.96$), this difference being highly significant and large, $t(131) = 5.81, p < .001, d = 1.02$. Self-interest did not influence inferences of communal qualities, $t < 1$. The second interaction was between other-interests and the perception content, $F(1, 129) = 35.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$. As shown in the right panel of Figure 1, persons acting for interests of others were perceived as more communal ($M = 4.60, SD = 0.86$) than those acting against others' interests ($M = 3.12, SD = 0.92$), and this difference was highly significant, $t(131) = 9.55, p < .001, d = 1.66$. Other-interest did not influence inferences of agentic qualities, $t < 1$.

Whereas acting for own interests strongly influenced perceptions of agency, but not communion, acting for interests of others strongly influenced inferences of communion, but not agency. Because the content was balanced and held constant (what for one half of participants was an action relevant for self-interest was the action relevant for other-interest for another half and *vice versa*), these effects are independent of the action efficiency. Clearly, what counted here was the action goal: when an action served self-interest it was used as an evidence for agentic, but not communal qualities. However, when the same action served other-interest it evidenced communal, but not agentic qualities.

Attitude and Voting Intention

Attitude and voting intentions were strongly correlated ($r = .78$) and analyses of these two variables yielded virtually identical results. Therefore, we present here only analyses concerning attitudes. A 2 (self-interest: for vs. against) \times 2

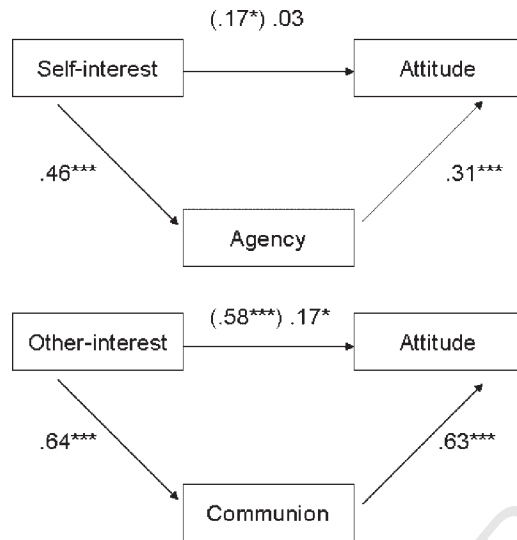


Figure 2. Perceived agency as a mediator of the self-interest influence on attitudes and perceived communion as a mediator of the other-interest influence on attitudes (standardized regression coefficients, unmediated effects are given in parentheses)

(other-interest: for vs. against) analysis of variance performed on the attitude index yielded two significant main effects and no interaction. Attitudes toward the politician acting for other-interest were much more positive ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.89$) than those toward the politician acting against other-interests ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.07$); this effect was relatively strong, $F(1, 129) = 65.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$. On the other hand, attitudes toward the politician acting for his own interests were slightly more positive ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.15$) than those toward the politician acting against self-interests ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.2$); this effect was relatively weak, $F(1, 129) = 4.88$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

Our two-interest model predicts that self-interest influences attitudes because acting for one's own interests leads to inferences of agentic qualities, while the other-interest influences attitudes due to inferences of communal qualities. To test whether the increase in attitude resulting from self-interest is due to inference of agency, a mediation analysis was performed with the self-interest (for vs. against) as a dummy coded independent variable, the attitude as the dependent variable, and the perceived agency serving as a mediator. As can be seen in Figure 2 (left panel), the results fulfilled the mediation criteria (*cf.* Baron & Kenny, 1986). The unmediated standardized $\beta = .17$, $p < .03$ dropped to the mediated value $\beta = .03$, and this drop was significant as evidenced by Sobel test, $z = 2.83$, $p < .005$. Increases in attitude resulting from self-interest were entirely mediated by changes in the perceived agency. To strengthen our argument we also tested the reverse mediational path with perceived agency serving as a dependent and attitude as a mediator. In this analysis the unmediated influence of self-interest on agency was moderate ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$), and it remained moderate ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) after including the attitude as a mediator.

The second analysis involved other-interest (for vs. against) as an independent variable, attitude as the dependent variable, and the perceived communion as a mediator. As can be seen in Figure 2 (right panel), the results once more fulfilled the mediation criteria and the unmediated standardized $\beta = .58$, $p < .001$ dropped to the mediated value $\beta = .17$, $p < .05$ and this drop was significant as evidenced by Sobel test, $z = 6.28$, $p < .001$. Increases in attitude resulting from other-interest were mostly mediated by changes in the perceived communion. Still, a small (and significant) amount of attitude variance depended on other-interest even when controlling for the perceived communion. This suggests that acting for versus against interest of others (potentially including the perceiver) may change purely affective responses toward the target, that is, responses which are not mediated by cognitive inferences.

Finally, as can be seen in Table 1, global attitudes more strongly correlated with the perceived communion ($r = .74$, $p < .001$) than with the perceived agency ($r = .32$, $p < .001$); this difference was significant, $z = 4.85$, $p < .001$. In line with classical findings, in personal cognition the communal dimension is generally more important than the agency dimension (*cf.* Fiske et al., 2007 and Wojciszke, 2005, for reviews). This finding parallels the presently found unequal contribution of acting for other- versus self-interest to global attitudes and voting intentions.

DISCUSSION

The present study yielded a coherent set of findings. Information on a politician acting for his self-interests leads to inferences of his agency, while information on similar actions performed in the service of others' interests leads to inferences of communion. Moreover, actions serving other-interests influence attitudes to a higher degree than actions serving the target's self-interest. The other-interest influence on attitudes is mediated by inferences of communal qualities of the politician, while the self-interest influence on attitudes is mediated by inferences of his agentic qualities.

Clearly, the content of traits inferred from behavior varies systematically based on whether the behavior serves the self- or other-interest—showing this is the novel contribution of the present study. When an action serves self-interest, it is used as a cue to infer agentic qualities such as competence, persistence, and wisdom and slightly increases an attitude toward the actor. When, however, an identical action serves other-interests, perceivers seem to ignore the agentic content and use the behavior as a cue to infer communal qualities such as friendliness, consideration, and honesty and this strongly increases attitudes toward the actor. Mother Theresa's actions were widely recognized as serving interests of others, though they were not recognized as efficient. Our data suggest that to be perceived as efficient, Mother Theresa should have shown efficiency in actions serving her own interests.

Present findings extend and corroborate the double interest account of bidimensionality of social cognition (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005), which assumes that the agency dimension taps self-interests of the acting person while the communion dimension taps interests of others who are potential or actual recipients of actions expressing this dimension. Whereas actions serving self-interest seem to be associated with agentic qualities, actions serving other-interest are associated with communal qualities. In effect, acting for self- or other-interest leads to inferences of agentic or communal qualities of the acting person, respectively, as shown in the present study. Because associations are bidirectional, it can be also expected that communal qualities lead to perceiving the person as acting for interests of others, while agentic qualities lead to perceiving the person as acting for his or her own interests. That communality leads to actions serving other-interest is hardly surprising because this propensity is built into the definition of most communal traits. But the idea that agency leads to inferences of egoistic focus on self-interest is novel and non-obvious because it postulates that something negative (egoistic behavior) may be inferred from positive qualities (high agency including competence). Such a prediction seems to be inconsistent with analyses of Peeters (1983) who assumes that acting for one's own interests is an essential component of cooperation and does not lead to egoistic inferences as long as the acting for the own interests is not at the cost of others' interests. However, if the present reasoning is true it may contribute to understanding of why high achievers frequently face resentment (Feather, 1999) and why high status (competent) persons are sometimes perceived as showing less moral integrity than low status ones (Wojciszke, Baryla, & Mikiewicz, 2007). Clearly, the hypothesis that information on high competence suffices to draw inferences on propensity to egoism remains to be tested directly.

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