Original Papers

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Agency versus Communion as Predictors of Self-esteem: Searching for the Role of Culture and Self-construal

Abstract: Two hypotheses concerning the relative importance of agentic versus communal traits as predictors of self-esteem were tested. The perspective hypothesis assumed that self-esteem is dominated by agency over communion because self-perceptions are formed from the agent (versus recipient) perspective. The culture hypothesis assumed that self-esteem is dominated by communal concerns in collectivistic cultures and by agentic concerns in individualistic cultures (echoed by individual differences in self-construal). Study 1 involving three samples from collectivistic countries and three from individualistic ones found that self-esteem was better predicted from self-ratings of agentic than communal traits, with the exception of collectivistic women for whom the two predictors were equal. Study 2 primed the interdependent or independent self and found self-ratings of agency to be better predictors of self-esteem than self-ratings of communion, with the exception of interdependence priming,where the two predictors were equal in strength.
Key words: Agency, Communion, Culture, Self-construal, Self-esteem

There is a general agreement that social cognition involves two basic dimensions of content –agency (competence) and communion (warmth). While agentic content refers to qualities relevant to goal-attainment, such as intelligence, competence or persistence, communal content refers to qualities relevant to the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, such as being kind, fair, or moral (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). This distinction appears under different names, such as masculine-feminine, agentic-communal, task- versus relationship-orientation, individualistic-collectivistic, intellectually-socially good-bad, competence-morality, or competence-warmth (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt & Kashima, 2005). Although these distinctions are not identical, they show a substantial overlap when studied empirically at the level of abstract trait-names, frequently used to capture their meaning. There are strong correlations between how much a trait conveys agency, morality, individualism, and masculinity on the one hand, and how much a trait conveys communion, competence, collectivism, and femininity on the other (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). In effect, agency and communion constitute two separate clusters of meaning which capture two recurring challenges of human life – pursuing individual goals and being a member of social groups and relationships (Ybarra, Chan, Park, Burnstein, Monin & Stanik, 2008).

A variety of research showed these two types of content play a prominent role in various operations involved in person perception –they frequently appear in spontaneous descriptions of others (e.g. organizational and political leaders) and are used in behavior interpretations, they are actively looked for when impressions are formed, as well as strongly influence interpersonal attitudes accounting for up to an 80% variance of such global evaluations (Wojciszke, Bazinska & Jaworski, 1998, see also Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi & Cherubini, 2010). At the group level these two types of content constitute the basic dimensions of stereotypes – groups varying in their status are perceived as different in their competence level, while groups varying in their benevolent-malevolent intentions toward "us" are perceived as different in their communion and warmth, as proposed by the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002). This model was showed to be valid over a variety of groups in different countries (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2008).

Our research examines whether agentic and communal concerns have different impact on self-esteem depending on culture (the culture hypothesis), or whether

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self-rated agency is stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-rated communion independently of culture (the perspective hypothesis).

Content Dimensions and Self-esteem

The two content dimensions play an important role in self-perception. However, there is an important peculiarity of self-perceptions compared to the perception of others and groups. Whereas the communal content is more important than the agentic one in person and group perception, the opposite tends to be true in self-perception. For example, although others' behavior is construed in communal rather than agentic terms, agentic terms are used to a higher degree than communal ones in the construal of one's own behavior and that of close others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Similarly, interpersonal evaluations are dominated by communal over agentic concerns (Wojciszke et al., 1998), but self-evaluation (self-esteem) is dominated by agentic over communal considerations. The latter tendency was shown in a long line of correlational studies, where self-rated agency and self-rated communion served as predictors of global self-esteem. Notwithstanding the age and gender of participants, self-rated agency proved a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-rated communion across five measures of self-esteem (Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow & Abele, 2011). A similar tendency was also shown experimentally – priming the agentic (positive or negative) content influenced self-esteem, while priming the communal content had no such effect, though it influenced global evaluations of other persons (Wojciszke & Sobiczewska, 2013).

The Perspective Hypothesis

Why self-esteem should be more influenced by agentic than communal considerations? One explanation is provided by the Dual Perspective Model (DPM) (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Wojciszke et al., 2011). DPM starts with a simple observation that social behavior always involves at least two perspectives – the standpoint of an agent (a person who performs the act in question) and the standpoint of a recipient, a person at whom the action is directed. 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's recipient, while agentic content denotes how much the action aids the current goal and serves the interests 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. The agentic perspective is assumed mainly when perceiving the self but also when perceiving close others and people whose actions fulfil the perceiver's interests vicariously (like "my lawyer", Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). From the recipient's 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).

In effect, while other-cognition (person and group perception) is typically dominated by communal categories, self-cognition is dominated by agency over communion. This clear dichotomy is somewhat diluted by self-reputational concerns – because people want to be accepted by others (and this depends more on communal than agentic qualities), they stress their communal virtues in self-descriptions (Ybarra, Park, Stanik & Lee, 2012). Indeed, both Ybarra et al. (2012) and Wojciszke et al. (2011) found self-ratings of communion to be higher than self-rating of agency. Nevertheless, when the content importance is ascertained not by declarative self-descriptions, but by an analytical tracing of the influence (via regression analyzes) of agentic versus communal contents on global evaluative impressions, self-esteem appears more dependent on agentic than communal considerations, independently of whether measured in correlational designs or manipulated experimentally.

The Culture Hypothesis

An alternative explanation of the agency-over-communion dominance in self-esteem can be formulated in terms of cultural values and identities. The strong relation between agency and self-esteem may reflect not individual functioning but rather an individualistic cultural norm which prescribes putting more weight on efficiency than personal relationships that are valued more in collectivistic societies (Schwartz, 1992). Because agency is highly valued in individualistic societies, it probably constitutes the core of an individualistic self-identity, especially among highly educated members of society (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). This may explain why self-esteem appeared so strongly correlated with the self-rated agency in our previous research, as all our participants came from a relatively individualistic (Polish) culture. On the other hand, people coming from collectivistic societies define their selves not in terms of individual qualities but in terms of their relationships and social identities and this tendency emerges very early (at kindergarten age, Heine, 2008). It follows, that in collectivistic societies self-esteem may depend on communal concerns to a higher degree than on agentic ones.

Moreover, in both collectivistic and individualistic societies people vary individually in the degree to which they cherish collectivistic versus individualistic values (Heine, 2008), as well as in the degree they define their selves in an interdependent versus dependent way (Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002).Those with an independent self-construal define themselves in terms of internal and private attributes, abilities, and preferences whereas those with an interdependent self-construal define themselves in terms of their relationships with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In effect, even within an individualistic (or collectivistic) society people may vary in the degree that their self-esteem depends on agentic versus communal considerations. The agency-over-communion pattern in self-esteem may be less pronounced or even inverted in persons showing an interdependent self-construal. A similar role may be predicted for gender. Women tend to show a higher interdependent self-construal than menand the prescriptive norm is probably even stronger in this respect (Cross & Madson, 1997). Although Wojciszke et al. (2011) did not find any gender differences in the agency-over-communion effect on self-esteem, all their participants came from an individualistic culture. Things may be different for women originating from collectivistic cultures, where pressures on communion stemming from the traditional gender stereotype may be bolstered by pressures stemming from cultural norms.

To sum up, our present cultural hypothesis is that the agency-over-communion effect in self-esteem is reversed for participants coming from collectivistic societies, showing a high degree of interdependent self-construal, as well as for women originating from collectivistic cultures. The sepredictions are clearly discrepant with the perspective hypothesis assuming that as far as people perceive themselves as agents, their self-esteem is more dependent on agentic than communal considerations.

The Present Studies

The present studies aimed at empirical testing the relative validity of the perspective and culture hypothesis. To this end we conducted a cross-cultural study 1, where we recruited three samples from highly individualistic societies and three from highly collectivistic ones. All participants filled identical questionnaires measuring self-ratings of agentic and communal traits as well as self-esteem. In the analyzes we regressed self-esteem on agentic and communal self-ratings, testing whether self-ratings of agency would prove a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ratings of communion for all samples (the perspective hypothesis), or only in the individualistic cultures with an inversion in the collectivistic ones (the culture hypothesis). Additionally, we tested the role of gender as a moderator and we also tested four individual differences in self-construal as potential moderators of the agency-over-communion effect on self-esteem.

In study 2 we primed the independent or interdependent self-construal and then measured self-ratings of agentic and communal traits, as well as self-esteem. Our aim was to test whether the primed self-construal moderates the relative strength of agency and communion as self-esteem predictors. A significant moderation would support the cultural hypothesis, a lack of such moderation would support the perspective hypothesis.

Study 1

We recruited three samples from extremely individualistic countries (Britain, the Netherlands, USA) and another three from extremely collectivistic countries (China, Colombia, Japan). The cultural orientation of those countries was identified in numerous cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 1980; Nisbett, 2009; Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai & Lucca, 1988; Triandis, 1995).We measured self-rating of agentic and communal traits and self-esteem using the same questionnaires in all samples. In each sample one additional scale was employed to measure individual differences in self-construal to check whether they function as moderators of the relative prominence of agency and communion as self-esteem predictors.[1]

Method

Participants. Participants were 186 women and 284 men coming from six countries. Two samples (American and Japanese) were reached via internet (using American or Japanese web sites written in English or Japanese). The four remaining samples were students contacted personally by the researchers. Student samples were younger (typically 21-23 years of age) than the internet samples (American M_{age} = 33.62, SD = 11.57; Japanese M_{age} = 30.11, SD = 8.76). Samples were comparable with respect to education. Sample sizes are listed in Table 1.

Measures of agency, communion, and self-esteem. Self-description on agency and communion were measured by 7 adjectives describing traits each (agency: *Clever, Competent, Efficient, Energetic, Intelligent, Knowledgeable, Logical*; communion: *Fair, Good-natured, Honest, Loyal, Self-less, Sincere, Truthful*).Answers were given on scales ranging from 1 (*definitely doesn't apply to me*) to 7 (*definitely applies to me*). We used the average rating of each subset of traits as our agency and communion measures.

The traits were carefully balanced for favorability and their agency- vs. communion-relatedness. The average favorability of the agentic traits was 4.09, for communal traits the average was 4.21 (both rated on scales ranging from –5 to 0 to 5; rated by separate 19 raters coming from Poland, cf. Wojciszke, Dowhyluk & Jaworski, 1998). Principal component analyzes performed on these ratings separately for each country always revealed two dominant (or sole) factors, one corresponding to agency, the other corresponding to communion. The two factors typically explained more than 50% of the variance in self-ratings. Reliabilities of the agency and communion scales varied from .70 to .84 (see Table 1 for details).

[1] All scales were in the languages of the countries involved in our research.

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In our previous research (Wojciszke et al., 2011) the agency-over-communion pattern was found using each of six measures of self-esteem (self-esteem as a trait or as a state, self-liking, self-competence, narcissism, and preference for own initials). Therefore in the present study we used only the most popular measure – the classical Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale with a 1-5 answering format (from 1 – *strongly disagree*, to 5 – *strongly agree*, including a middle (3) value that was originally not included by Rosenberg).This scale showed a satisfactory reliability with Cronbach's α varying from .70 to .91. The Colombian sample was an exception – to achieve a satisfactory reliability of .70 we had to remove the third item of the original scale.

Self-construal measures. In the Dutch sample we used the Communal Orientation Scale devised by Clark, Oulette, Powell & Milberg (1987).[2] This scale comprises 14 items (e.g., "When making a decision I take other people's needs and feelings into account") that are answered on five-point rating scales. It achieved a reliability of .74. In the American, Chinese, and Japanese samples we used the Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (RISC) devised by Cross, Bacon and Morris (2000).[3] This scale comprises 11 items (e.g., "My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am") that are answered on seven-point rating scales. The scale appeared sufficiently reliable with alphas of .89 (Americans), .71 (Chinese) and .78 (Japanese). Finally, in the British and Colombian samples we used the Scale of Independent and Interdependent Self-construal devised by Singelis (1994).[4] This scale consists of 30 items (e.g., "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects"; "My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me") that are answered on seven point rating scales. This scale yields two separate scores of independency and interdependency which showed relatively low reliabilities in the present study (the British sample: .65 and .71; the Colombian sample: .78 and .66).

All these measures of self-construal were proposed in the literature as relevant for the distinction between the independent self-construal (echoing the individualistic culture on the individual difference level) and interdependent self-construal (echoing the collectivistic culture). Using four different scales tapping individual differences in self-construal we tried to extend external validity of those differences.

Table 1. Distribution of Self-esteem, Agency and Communion Measures in Samples of Study 1

Sample	Self-esteem		Agency		Communion		t
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
American	3.91_{bc}	0.71	5.54_{bc}	0.78	5.67_b	0.68	1.65
$N = 81$	(.89)		(.78)		(.78)		
British	3.69_{ab}	0.75	5.40_{bc}	0.70	5.55_b	0.59	1.83 *
$N = 60$	(.85)		(.77)		(.75)		
Dutch	3.99_{cd}	0.70	5.23_{bc}	0.66	5.59_b	0.59	5.43 ***
$N = 120$	(.87)		(.77)		(.74)		
Chinese	3.53_a	0.55	5.12_b	0.83	5.59_b	0.73	4.66 ***
$N = 61$	(.71)		(.82)		(.84)		
Colombian	4.23_c	0.61	5.51_c	0.75	5.63_b	0.75	1.35
$N = 60$	(.70)		(.79)		(.79)		
Japanese	3.43_a	0.73	4.50_a	1.08	4.97_a	0.97	3.59 ***
$N = 89$	(.91)		(.80)		(.84)		

Notes: Reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) are given in parentheses; means within a column that do not share a common subscriptare significantly different at $p < .05$ (Tukey's test); t is Student's test for dependent-samples comparing self-ratings of communion and agency.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Results and Discussion

Self-esteem level. A 2 (culture) x 2 (gender) analysis of variance performed on the self-esteem ratings yielded a main effect of culture. Self-esteem of participants from the individualistic countries ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.72$) was higher than that of participants from the collectivistic societies ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.74$), $F(1, 466) = 13.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. The lower self-esteem in collectivistic than individualistic samples is consistent with the idea of Heine (2008) that self-esteem strivings are relatively lower in collectivistic societies. However, this cultural difference held only for women who showed higher self-esteem when coming from individualistic societies ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.71$) than collectivistic ones ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(184) = 3.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .53$. Men showed relatively high self-esteem when coming from both individualistic ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.73$) and collectivistic ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.71$) societies, $t(282) = 1.40$, ns. Finally, also the main effect of gender was significant formen ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.72$) showing a higher score than women ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.74$), $F(1, 466)$

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[2] The Communal Orientation Scale (Clark et al., 1987) measures communal orientation defined as a tendency to build communal relationships, accompanied by sensitivity to the needs of others and an expectancy that others will care about one's own needs. Communal orientation is conceptually close to self-ascribed communion and its behavioral consequences. People of higher communal orientation are more emphatic, ready to help and initiate relationships, they are more responsive to the needs of others and tend to ascribe similar tendencies to others (Lemay & Clark, 2008).

[3] The Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (RISC) of Cross et al. (2000) measures the tendency to think of oneself in terms of relationships with close others. These authors observed that high scorers on this scale find their important relationships as relatively closer, more committed and more satisfactory. High scorers are also more likely to take into account the needs of others when making decisions, they can see more similarity between themselves and their partners and are seen by the latter as more open and responsive to their concerns.

[4] The Scale of Independent and Interdependent Self-construal (Singelis, 1994) captures the classic distinction introduced by Markus and Kitayama (1991). These two types of construal are measured by two separate subscales.

= 13.63, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. This gender difference of small size ($d = 0.31$) is typical for numerous research as shown by meta-analyzes (Kling, Hyde, Showers & Buswell, 1999).

Self-ratings of agency and communion. A 2 (culture) x 2 (gender) x 2 (content: agentic vs. communal) analysis of variance with repeated measurements on the last factor yielded a main effect of content, $F(1, 466) = 75.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$, such that communion ($M = 5.49$, $SD = .74$) was always rated higher than agency ($M = 5.13$, $SD = .86$). Despite the significant interaction between culture and content, $F(1, 466) = 4.00$, $p = .046$, $\eta^2 = .01$, the difference showed for both cultures as illustrated in Figure 1. Independently of culture, people tend to ascribe themselves more communion than agency.

Moreover, there was an interaction between content and gender, $F(1, 466) = 19.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, such that communion ratings did not differ between women ($M = 5.46$, $SD = .67$) and men ($M = 5.31$, $SD = .79$), $t < 1$, whereas women's agency ratings were lower ($M = 4.99$, $SD = .89$) than men's ($M = 5.32$, $SD = .86$), $t(468) = 4.08$, $p < .001$, $d = .39$. Finally, we found a culture main effect, $F(1, 466) = 28.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, indicating that participants from individualistic countries rated the traits higher ($M = 5.47$, $SD = .57$) than participants from collectivistic countries ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .78$). Because all the traits were positive, this findings echoes the higher self-esteem in individualistic than collectivistic samples.

Figure 1. Self-ratings of agentic and communal traits as a function of culture (Study 1).
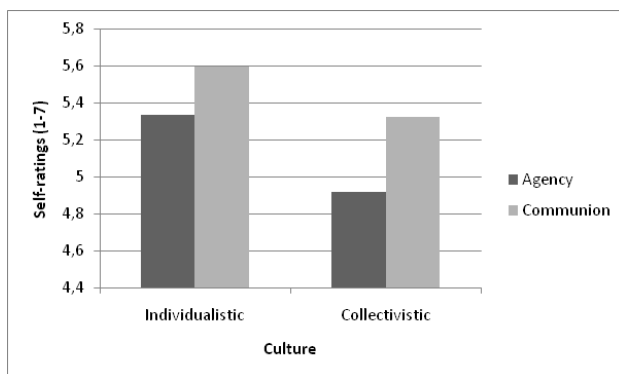
The higher self-ratings of communal than agentic virtues are consistent with previous findings (Abele, 2003; Wojciszke et al., 2011). Also the cross-cultural nature of this difference is consistent with results of Ybarra et al. (2012) who found this difference for both American and Korean samples. The present data extends this finding to other cultures and for the first time it shows the moderating role of gender. It is well-known that gender stereotypes are cross-culturally similar in content, though not in scope (Glick et al., 2000, 2004). Showing less agency than communion is congruent with the stereotype of femininity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and therefore more pronounced for women. It is less pronounced for men presumably because showing less agency is incongruent with the masculinity stereotype.

Agency versus communion as predictors of self-esteem. To differentiate between the perspective hypothesis (agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than communion) and the culture hypothesis (agency is a stronger predictor in individualistic countries while communion is a stronger predictor in collectivistic countries) we regressed self-esteem on agentic and communal self-ratings in a simultaneous linear regression performed separately for individualistic and collectivistic samples. As can be seen in Table 2, in both cultures the whole model was significant and ratings of agency and communion explained a substantial amount of variance in self-esteem. In the individualistic samples, self-ratings of agency appeared a strong predictor of self-esteem ($\beta = .39$), while communal self-ratings failed to predict self-esteem ($\beta = .02$) and the two coefficients differed significantly, $t(259) = 3.33$, $p < .001$. This configuration was even stronger for collectivistic samples, with agency predicting self-esteem ($\beta = .55$) and communion failing to do so ($\beta = .04$), the difference being significant, $t(204) = 4.54$, $p < .001$. This whole pattern of results is clearly consistent with the perspective hypothesis but discrepant with the cultural one.

Next, we repeated the analyzes of regression separately for each gender. As can be seen in the middle panel of Table 2, for men the agency ($\beta = .54$) proved a stronger predictor of self-esteem than communion ($\beta = -.03$), $t(280) = 5.93$, $p < .001$. For women, however, agency ($\beta = .35$) and communion ($\beta = .15$) proved equally strong predictors of self-esteem, the difference between the two coefficients being insignificant, $t(181) = 1.07$, $p = .29$. This gender difference was not found in previous studies (Wojciszke et al., 2011) involving only Polish samples. The emergence of this difference in the present study may be due to the fact that about half of the women came from collectivistic samples, for whom self-rated communion may be a significant predictor of self-esteem.

To test this reasoning we repeated the regression analyzes separately for each of the four combinations of gender (males, females) and culture (individualistic, collectivistic). These analyzes yielded a clear pattern presented in the lowest panel of Table 2. Whereas agency was a significant predictor of self-esteem in each gender/ culture combination, communion was significant only in one combination – among women coming from collectivistic countries. Moreover, in three combinations agency was a stronger predictor of self-esteem than communion (which failed to predict self-esteem): among individualistic men, $t(149) = 2.78$, $p = .006$, individualistic women, $t(107) = 1.75$, $p = .08$, and collectivistic men, $t(130) = 5.86$, $p < .001$ (all two-tailed tests). Only among the collectivistic women the self-rated communion emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .25$) along with the self-rated agency which was significant as well ($\beta = .27$).

The present data support the perspective rather than culture hypothesis. In every combination of gender and culture, self-rated agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem and it always remains significant. Self-rated communion emerges as a significant predictor of self-esteem only when the gender and culture work in the same

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direction. However, even among collectivistic women the basic agency-over-communion pattern does not get reversed – self-ratings of both contents appear equally strong predictors of self-esteem.

Table 2. Regression of Self-esteem on Agency and Communion in Samples of Study 1

Sample/predictor	F (model)	Adj. R^2	β	t
Culture				
Individualistic	25.02***	.17		
Agency			.39	6.14***
Communion			.02	< 1
Collectivistic	49.55***	.32		
Agency			.55	8.33***
Communion			.04	<1
Gender				
Men	22.87***	.19		
Agency			.54	9.24***
Communion			-.03	< 1
Women	54.21***	.27		
Agency			.35	4.62***
Communion			.15	2.02*
Culture/gender combination				
Ind.men	16.06***	.17		
Agency			.42	4.84***
Communion			.00	< 1
Ind.women	7.75**	.11		
Agency			.34	3.45**
Communion			.06	< 1
Coll. men	42.18***	.39		
Agency			.65	8.41***
Communion			-.06	< 1
Coll. men	10.86***	.20		
Agency			.27	2.47*
Communion			.25	2.07*

Note. [a] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The role of self-construal. To test the self-construal hypothesis we analyzed whether the agency over communion pattern in predicting self-esteem holds when including the further self-construal measures. In the Dutch sample the Communal Orientation Scale (Clark et al., 1987) correlated with communion, $r(119) = .32$, $p < .001$, but not with agency, $r(119)= -.01$, *ns*. This gives credibility to the idea that the communal orientation score indeed taps communal self-construal. We computed a regression in which we included the interaction term (the product of communal orientation by self-rated communion) as a predictor of self-esteem in addition to self-ascribed agency

and communion. However, this interaction failed to predict self-esteem independently, β = .16, $p = .87$.

As could be expected, the RISC (Cross et al., 2000) correlated with self-rated communion in the American sample, $r(81) = .21$, $p = .027$, one-tailed; in the Chinese sample, $r(60) = .30$, $p < .021$ and the Japanese sample, $r(88) = .23$, $p = .014$. We computed the interaction term again (product of RISC by communion self-ratings) and performed a regression analysis for each sample separately. In the Chinese (β = .08) and Japanese (β = .01) samples the interaction term did not reach significance. In the American sample the interaction term was significant (β = .29, $p = .030$), and the additional amount of variance in self-esteem explained was significant, too, $F(1, 77) = 4.87$, $p = .030$. To trace the exact shape of this interaction, we divided the American sample into two groups of relatively low and high communal orientation (median split) and repeated the regression analyzes with self-rated agency and communion as predictors of self-esteem for each of the groups. For the low group, the regression coefficients were .46, $p = .005$ and .01, ns, for agency and communion respectively. For the high group they were .42, $p= .042$ and –.11, *ns*. Hence, in both groups the prediction of self-esteem from communion self-ratings remained non-significant, but the prediction from self-rated agency tended to be significant. This pattern does not follow the self-construal hypothesis.

Finally, the independent self-construal (Singelis, 1994) correlated with agency self-ratings both in the British sample, $r(59) = .46$, $p < .001$ and the Colombian one, $r(59) = .40$, $p < .001$. However, the interdependent self-construal did not correlate with the communion self-ratings in the British sample, $r(59) = .00$, though we found such a correlation in the Colombian sample $r(59) = .49$, $p < .001$. Next, we included the interaction terms (either interdependent self-construal by communion or independent self-construal by agency) as predictors of self-esteem in addition to the agency and communion ratings. In both samples, none of the interaction terms was significant (*ps* > .08).

To conclude, despite significant correlations between independent self-construal and agency and interdependent self-construal and communion in most samples, the self-construal hypothesis received no support. In none of the samples did the self-construal moderate the general pattern of agency as a stronger predictor of self-esteem than communion.

Conclusion

Participants from collectivistic cultures showed a lower self-esteem than those from individualistic cultures, however, this difference was mainly due to women. Participants from all samples ascribed themselves more communion than agency replicating previous findings. In line with the perspective hypothesis, the self-ratings of agency proved to be better predictors of self-esteem than the self-ratings of communion and this pattern was not moderated by individual differences in self-construal. It was only modified when gender and culture worked in the same direction (collectivistic women) – in this case, agency and

communion were both significant predictors of self-esteem. It may be concluded that self-rated agency was always a significant predictor of self-esteem, while self-rated communion became such a predictor only when fostered by both gender and culture. The culture hypothesis received only a meagre support, although it cannot be generally rejected based on the present data because most of our participants from collectivistic samples were young and/or students which may have decreased their representativeness for collectivistic culture.

Study 2

Although Study 1 yielded a clear pattern of results showing how culture and gender shape agency and communion as predictors of self-esteem, these findings are purely correlational which raises the problems of causation and control typical for this type of research. Therefore, in the present study we experimentally manipulated the independent versus interdependent self-construal and proceeded with measuring self-esteem and self-ratings of agency and communion. There are several ways to prime different self-construal experimentally (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). One of them was developed by Trafimow, Triandis and Goto (1991) and involves writing about similarities between the self and close friends and relatives (to prime interdependent self) or writing about differences (to prime independent self). Because numerous studies showed this method to be efficient in activating values, cognitions, and relational concerns postulated by the dependence-interdependence distinction (Oyserman & Lee, 2008), we decided to employ this method in the present study

Method

Participants. Participants were 136 women and 82 men ranging in age from 19 to 24. They were Polish university students and participated in the study via the internet.

Manipulation. To manipulate self-construal, we asked our participants to describe similarities or differences between themselves and their closest friends and family. In the control condition, participants were asked to describe their typical way from home to their university.

Measures. As previously, self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg scale (α = .88). Self-ratings of agency and communion were measured with a different (though conceptually equivalent) set of traits than in Study 1. The new trait list consisted of 30 items (adjectives) selected from a pool of 300 trait names (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, Study 1). These items were pre-rated for communion-relatedness, agency-relatedness and global favorability on -5 to 0 to 5 scales. We selected 15 communal items (*Agreeable, Caring, Compassionate, Compliant, Considerate, Friendly, Forgiving, Helpful, Kind, Self-sacrificing, Sensitive to others, Supportive, Tolerant, Trustworthy,* and *Understanding*) as well as 15 agentic ones (*Active, Ambitious, Competent, Determined, Efficient, Industrious, Ingenious, Leader-like, Persistent, Persuasive, Resourceful,*

Self-confident, Steadfast, Strong-willed, and *Vigorous*). 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_{agency} = 4.22 and $M_{communion}$ = 1.30). The principal component analysis of self-ratings for these traits revealed two dominant components (explaining jointly 43% of variance). The first of them clearly referred to communion, the second referred to agency. Accordingly, two scales were devised to measure self-ratings of communion (Cronbach's α = .90) and agency (α = .89).

Results and Discussion

Self-esteem and self-ratings. The analysis of variance in a 3 (condition: independent self-construal vs. interdependent self-construal vs. control) x 2 (gender) design on self-esteem revealed a weak but significant main effect of the condition, $F(2, 212) = 3.77$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$ and no other effects were significant. As can be seen in Table 3, the interdependent priming decreased self-esteem compared to the independent priming. The difference between the interdependent and control condition was only marginally significant ($p = .056$, Tukey's test).

Initial analyzes revealed no effect of gender on trait self-ratings. Univariate analyzes of variance performed separately on the self-ratings of agency and communion showed no effect of conditions on communion but a significant effect on agency, $F(2, 215) = 3.96$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$. Like for self-esteem, the interdependent priming decreased agentic self-ratings compared to the independent priming. The difference between the interdependent and control condition was only marginally significant ($p = .051$, Tukey's test). Finally, independently of the condition and gender, self-ratings of communal traits ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.70$) were higher than those of agentic ones ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(217) = 6.69$, $p < .001$. These results partially replicate the findings of Study 1, where participants also rated their communion higher than agency and self-esteem was independent of gender in individualistic samples.

Table 3. Mean Ratings of Self-esteem, Agency and Communion as a Function of Priming (Study 2)

	Priming condition		
	Independent	Control	Interdependent
Self-esteem	3.86$_{ab}$	3.72$_{bc}$	3.46$_c$
	(0.70)	(0.74)	(0.70)
Self-esteem	5.11$_{ab}$	5.07$_{bc}$	4.78$_c$
	(0.69)	(0.87)	(0.76)
Communion	5.49$_a$	5.40$_a$	5.42$_a$
	(0.67)	(0.73)	(0.70)

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses; means within a raw that do not share a common subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ (Tukey's test).

Agency versus communion as predictors of self-esteem. To check whether priming influences the basic pattern (of self-esteem as being better predicted

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from agentic than communal self-ratings), we performed a two-step hierarchical analysis of regression. In the first step, we entered self-ratings of agency and communion as simultaneous predictors of self-esteem. As can be seen in the upper panel of Table 4, agency once more proved a sole predictor of self-esteem. In the second step we additionally entered interactions terms between the two self-ratings and the condition (the latter coded as a dummy variable). The interaction with the condition appeared significant for agency and marginally significant for communion, as shown in Table 4. To disentangle these interactions, we performed separate analyzes of regression for each condition. The results are shown in the lower panel of Table 4 and they tell a simple story. Whereas agency remained a significant predictor of self-esteem in each condition, communion reached significance only in the interdependent priming condition. In this condition self-rated agency ($\beta = .37$) ceased to be a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-rated communion ($\beta = .19$), $t(217) = 1.16$, $p = .25$.

Table 4. Regression of Self-esteem on Agency and Communion in the Whole Sample (Hierarchical Regression) and in Three Conditions of Study 2

	F (model)	Adj. R^2	β	t
Whole sample				
Step 1.	36.07***	.24		
Agency			.50	8.40***
Communion			.01	< 1
Step 2.	20.11***	.27		
Agency			.72	4.90***
Communion			-.01	< 1
Agency x condition			-.59	1.79*
Communion x condition			.48	1.41[a]
Conditions				
Independent self	9.18***	.22		
Agency			.49	4.29***
Communion			-.02	< 1
Control	16.93***	.29		
Agency			.55	5.78***
Communion			-.13	1.34
Interdependent self	9.29***	.18		
Agency			.37	3.56***
Communion			.19	1.78*

Note. [a]$p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Self-construal manipulated in the present study appeared a stronger moderator of the agency-over-communion pattern in predictions of self-esteem compared to self-construal measured in Study 1 as an individual difference variable. Still, it proved a weak moderator – it was able to significantly increase the role of self-rated communion where expected (i.e. in the interdependent priming condition) but it was not able to undermine the basic role of self-rated agency which remained a significant predictor of self-esteem in every condition.

General Discussion

Self-esteem is one of the most studied psychological variables and for good reason. Striving for positive self-esteem is a motive driving a great variety of psychological processes and action – from defining concepts and memorizing events (in a self-serving way) to selecting jobs and partners (in ways fostering beliefs in positive self-worth – Tesser & Martin, 2006). As a trait, self-esteem is a reliable predictor of crucial life outcomes from depression to economic prospects and criminal behavior (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). If self-esteem is so important, then studying its antecedents is a vital scientific endeavor.

Antecedents of Self-esteem

In this work we entertained two hypotheses concerning the relative importance of agentic versus communal traits as predictors of self-esteem. The perspective hypothesis was derived from the Dual Perspective Model (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014) and assumed that self-esteem is dominated by agency over communion because self-perceptions are formed from the agent (versus recipient) perspective which results in the prominence of agentic categories. The culture hypothesis assumed that self-esteem is dominated by communal concerns in collectivistic cultures and by agentic concerns in individualistic cultures. This should be echoed by individual differences in the independent versus interdependent self-construal, as these differences are hypothesized to replicate the cultural differences between individualistic versus collectivistic societies on the individual level.

We tested these hypotheses in two studies. One involved student samples from three highly individualistic or collectivistic countries. In all six samples self-ratings of agentic traits appeared a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ratings of communal traits in line with our perspective hypothesis. However, when the analyzes were replicated separately for each combination of the 2 (culture) x 2 (gender) design, agency ceased to be dominant for one combination – collectivistic women. For this subsample, both agency and communion appeared significant predictors, in line with a weak version of the culture hypothesis (communion a significant but not a stronger predictor than agency). The basic agency-over communion pattern was not moderated by individual differences in the habitual self-construal, despite using three different questionnaires to measure them. In study 2 we primed the interdependent or independent self with similar results. Self-ratings of agency made a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ratings of communion in the independent and control conditions. Only in the interdependent priming condition, communion emerged as a significant predictor of self-esteem.

The perspective hypothesis received strong support

– agency was a robust and usually dominant predictor of self-esteem. The cultural hypothesis received almost no support – in samples coming from collectivistic countries communion was not a stronger predictor of self-esteem, actually, it became a significant predictor only in special conditions. People who judge themselves as assertive, competent, and goal-directed (agentic) demonstrate relatively higher self-esteem, while people who judge themselves as agreeable, friendly and kind (communal) do not show such increases in self-esteem when traits of both contents are equally positive. Also experimental priming of one's own agentic or communal virtues results in increased self-esteem only after agentic priming (Wojciszke & Sobiczewska, 2013). Clearly, self-esteem seems to be based more on agentic than communal considerations.Gebauer, Wagner, Sedikides, and Neberich (2013) also found that self-rated agency was an overall stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-rated communion. Having access to a very large sample of participants from twelve European countries these authors were able to uncover four moderators of the relative strength of these two predictors of self-esteem. The impact of agency was stronger in relatively agentic countries (i.e. where the country mean of agency was higher than in other countries) as well as among non-religious individuals, men, and younger adults. Only in very specific subsamples (i.e., older religious women from Germany) they found an inverted effect, that is, communion was a stronger predictor of self-esteem than agency.

The present conclusion may be objected on the basis that there is a greater semantic similarity between some self-esteem items and the items measuring agency rather than communion. For instance, "self-confident" is descriptive of self-esteem and belongs to the agentic domain. However, we think that this semantic similarity cannot explain the whole story. First, we have measured agency with different items in present studies 1 and 2 but the findings were stable. Second, in other research (Wojciszke et al., 2011) we obtained an identical pattern using self-esteem measures completely void of semantics (e.g. preferences for the letters making one's own initials, which is a good implicit measure of self-esteem). Third, this semantic alternative cannot explain what people desire for themselves and for others and these are different things. When asked what traits they wish for in their close partners people point to communal qualities (trustworthy, kind, supportive) much more frequently than to agentic virtues (successful, intelligent, confident) both in real and ideal partners (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas & Giles, 1999). Indeed, communal qualities of trustworthiness and (to a lesser degree) cooperativeness are highly valued in all interdependent partners, while agentic characteristics such as intelligence or athletic ability are considered important only when relevant to the specific nature of the interdependent partnership (Cottrell, Neuberg & Li, 2007). Although people desire communal virtues in others, they desire agentic qualities in themselves. This was shown in a study where participants rated how much they would want to complete commercial trainings in skills concerning agency (time management, persuading audience) or communion (helping others, moral self-development). The participants

preferred developing agentic skills for themselves, though they preferred developing communal skills for their friends (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). All these data can be parsimoniously explained with the idea of self- versus other-profitability: Agentic qualities are self-profitable (they bring immediate gains to the trait-possessor) while communal qualities are other-profitable (they bring immediate gains to surrounding others, the perceiver included) which is well-supported empirically (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014).

Rethinking Self-esteem

Our conclusion that self-esteem depends to a higher degree on agency than communion independently of culture is novel and important because of its discrepancy with a venerable line of theorizing on antecedents of self-esteem. Self-esteem has been typically theorized as a result of meeting standards of personal importance (James, 1907) or internalized cultural standards (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt & Schimel, 2004). This idea stimulated the contingencies of self-worth theory, which assumes 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 & Wolfe, 2001). Research inspired by this theory showed that 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). Similar fluctuations in daily self-esteem were observed among such students after receiving decisionsonbeing admitted or rejected by graduate school (Crocker, Sommers & Luthanen, 2002).To the best of our knowledge, such outcome-dependent fluctuations in self-esteem have never been reported for communal outcomes of persons who invested their self-worth in communal domains, such as family support or virtue.

It is well known that communal standards are held in higher regard than agentic ones world-wide (Schwartz, 1992) which implies that self-esteem should be based on communal rather than agentic considerations. Indeed, this is explicitly assumed by the sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary, 2005) positing that decreases in self-esteem serve as a device warning people against the danger of social exclusion. Lack of communion is a strong and universal basis for social exclusion (being egoistic, deceitful, and nasty are generally abhorred by others), while persons lacking specific agentic qualities are rejected only in the context where these qualities are needed (Cottrell et al., 2007). In effect, the sociometer theory implies a greater role of communal than agentic qualities in social exclusion/inclusion and the resulting variation in self-esteem. However, a meta-analysis of nearly two hundred studies showed that though social acceptance increases self-esteem, social rejection does not generally decrease self-esteem compared to neutral conditions (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles & Baumeister, 2009).Moreover, it is frequently 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 probably pertained to agency rather than communion. One important manipulation consisted 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 (Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs, 1995, study 3). Since the upcoming task was defined as dealing with "the 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 forthe exclusion. Our point is simply that social rejection is not necessarily based on communal deficiencies, because there are many reasons for social rejection including those based on agentic considerations.

As already mentioned, being a member of social groups and relationships is only one of the two basic challenges of human life, the other being an agentic pursuing of individual goals (Ybarra et al., 2008). There is no *a priori* reason why self-esteem should be connected only to one of these two universal tasks. The present data showing that self-esteem is strongly based on agentic considerations suggests an agentic function of self-esteem. It is well-known that achieved outcomes are higher when motivation is high and the latter is partially dependent on the subjective probability of success. Higher self-esteem increases a subjective probability of goal-attainment thereby helping to attain the goal. Therefore, high self-esteem is beneficial even if biased. This helps to understand why a highly positive self-esteem is typical for the majority of people in different cultures (including China, see Cai, Wu & Brown, 2009, although this may be not true for other East-Asian cultures, cf. Heine, 2008) Also the trajectory of changes in self-esteem across the life span (with increases in young and middle adulthood, a peak around 60 yearsof age and later decreases, see Orth, Trzesniewski & Robins, 2010) closely resembles what can be expected for agentic capabilities. Agentic functions and concomitants of self-esteem deserve closer consideration.

The past two decades have been the heyday of cultural psychology studies, generally seeking evidence for human diversity in cognitive, emotional, and social functioning. Hence, debating human universals seems to have been overlooked in recent psychology. Nonetheless, the existence of cultural invariants is no less true than the existence of cultural differences, and the former have been demonstrated within anthropology (e.g., Atran, 1998; Brown, 1991) but also for some classical psychological phenomena such as gender variation in mate preferences (Buss,1989) or aggression (Daly & Wilson, 1988). In an attempt to reintroduce invariants to psychology, Norenzayan and Heine (2005) proposed four degrees of universality: nonuniversals, existential universals, functional universals, and accessibility universals. According to these authors, a psychological phenomenon is a functional universal if

"(a) it is, in principle, cognitively available to people in all cultures; (b) has functionally the same use across cultures; and (c) can vary across cultures in the extent to which it is accessible" (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005, p. 773). Driven by these theorizing, we propose that agentic function of self-esteem is such a functional universal. The present studies showed that (a) this particular role of agentic content is observed both in collectivistic and individualistic cultures as well as over different types of self-construal (b) agency is a strong predictor of self-esteem, and (c) even though in some conditions the influence of agentic considerations is less pronounced relative to communal ones, the pattern does not get reversed. We believe that uncovering universals is a vital challenge for social psychology and that agentic function of self-esteem may be such a universal.

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