

Agentic and Communal Social Motives

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Abstract

People chart and navigate their social lives along two cardinal axes – agency and communion. The motives to approach communion (e.g., enhance closeness and cooperation), approach agency (e.g., gain status and control), avoid communion (e.g., limit vulnerabilities and obligations), and avoid agency (e.g., limit resentments and rivalries) can each be adaptive, depending on the person and situation. After reviewing common implicit and explicit measures of agentic and communal motives, I describe how these motives together shape (and are shaped by) diverse phenomena, such as individuals' involvements in mating and parenting and, concurrently, their testosterone and oxytocin levels. I also detail how normative models of development and maturation depict a shifting dynamic between communal and agentic motives over the lifespan: In childhood, secure attachments provide foundations for developing agency; in adulthood, the challenge becomes yoking agency (one's accumulated mental, physical, and social resources) to communal aims (nurturing others and prosocial endeavors).

Social motives – the motives that energize and direct social life – can be organized into two broad categories: agentic and communal (Bakan, 1966; Horowitz et al., 2006; Wiggins, 1991). Agentic motives concern advancing status and power relative to others, bolstering dominance and influence over others, and asserting positive distinctiveness from others. Communal motives concern caring about and nurturing others, joining and cooperating with others, and sharing and connecting with others. Pithily put, communal motives concern “fitting in” and “getting along”, whereas agentic motives concern “standing out” and “getting ahead” (Hogan & Roberts, 2000). In this paper, I will review (a) support for agency and communion as basic dimensions of social experience, (b) some common implicit and explicit measures of agentic and communal motives, (c) the risks and rewards of pursuing agency and communion, and (d) the lifelong interplay – sometimes cooperative but sometimes competitive – between agentic and communal motives.

Agency and Communion – Basic Dimensions of Social Experience

Agency and communion are basic dimensions of not only social motives but also social judgments and behaviors. The social cognition literature suggests that the descriptors people use to conceptualize themselves and others can be organized into agentic qualities (e.g., assertive, ambitious, capable, clever, confident, and decisive) and communal qualities (e.g., cooperative, empathetic, friendly, generous, sincere, and trustworthy) (for reviews, see Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, or Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Unsurprisingly, people with stronger communal motives ascribe to themselves more communal qualities, while people with stronger agentic motives ascribe to themselves more agentic qualities (Locke, 2000); these self-reports probably reflect a mixture of truth and bias, with agentic motives impelling enhancement of one's agentic qualities or “egoistic self-enhancement” and communal motives impelling enhancement of one's communal qualities or “moralistic self-enhancement” (Paulhus & John, 1998; Paulhus &

Trapnell, 2008). Studies of embodied cognition further suggest that agency and communion are basic experiential dimensions: While agency is automatically perceptually experienced and somatically embodied along above-versus-below (Oosterwijk, Rotteveel, Fischer, & Hess, 2009) and expansive-versus-contractive (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010) physical dimensions, communion is automatically perceptually experienced and somatically embodied along close-versus-distant (Holland, Roeder, van Baaren, Brandt, & Hannover, 2004) and warm-versus-cold (Zhang & Risen, 2014) physical dimensions.

Different hormones and neurotransmitters are dedicated to the regulation of agency and communion. Testosterone appears to be the key activator of agentic motives. Testosterone levels are positively correlated with self-report, observational, and implicit measures of agentic motivation (Knight & Mehta, 2014). Research suggests that whereas individuals with low testosterone levels prefer to cooperate than compete and prefer low status to high status positions, individuals with high testosterone levels are particularly prone to pursue competitive and aggressive actions directed towards attaining and retaining power (Mehta & Josephs, 2011). Testosterone thus may both strengthen agency and weaken communion, and sex differences in testosterone may help explain the observed sex differences in the relative importance of agency and communion to men versus women (Gebauer, Wagner, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2013).

Oxytocin appears to be a key activator of communal motives. (Vasopressin, a very similar peptide, often shows effects akin to those of oxytocin, but because the vasopressin literature is less robust, the current paper only discusses oxytocin.) Across mammalian species, oxytocin facilitates reproductive and parental behaviors. Stated bluntly, for female mammals mating and nursing entail another creature inserting fluid into or sucking fluid from your body; oxytocin is part of a suite of chemicals and circuits that encourage receptivity to these boundary violations that normally would be vigorously repelled. Oxytocin has been found to facilitate sexual responsiveness and maternal bonding in humans as well (Feldman, Weller, Zagoory-Sharon, & Levine, 2007; Salonia et al., 2005). However, during our evolutionary history, the function of oxytocin has progressively broadened from facilitating parenting to facilitating investment and commitment in diverse types of affiliations, including romantic relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015; Giskevicius, Haselton, & Ackerman, 2015). For example, men in committed relationships exposed to oxytocin viewed their partner as more attractive and stood farther from an attractive female stranger (Scheele et al., 2012, 2013). More broadly, oxytocin seems to promote attentiveness and responsiveness to social stimuli and social rewards, and trust, caring, helping, bonding, and reduced social anxiety among family members, romantic partners, friends, and other ingroup members (MacDonald & MacDonald, 2010). However, while oxytocin may intensify ingroup communion, it may simultaneously sharpen ingroup–outgroup boundaries and intensify competitive or aggressive behavior towards potentially threatening outgroup members (Shalvi & De Dreu, 2014).

Ultimately, agency and communion are fundamental, universal dimensions of social cognition and motivation because during our evolutionary history, an individual's capacity to appreciate and coordinate agency and communion within and between groups influenced that individual's inclusive fitness (Hogan & Roberts, 2000; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Consequently, we are the inheritors of genes that help shape our neurological and endocrine systems – as well as memes that help shape our conceptual systems – to be acutely attentive and sensitive to agency (status, dominance) and communion (kinship, solidarity) within and between groups.

Although organizing social phenomena within a parsimonious two-dimensional framework is appealing, it should be acknowledged that agency and communion are capacious concepts that encompass sundry separable elements. For example, impression formation research indicates that agency may be subdivided into competence and dominance (e.g., Chen, Jing, & Lee, 2014) and communion can be subdivided into sociability and morality (Brambilla & Leach, 2014).

Although many people are both competent and dominant, there also exist many quiet virtuosos and domineering dolts; and although many people are both friendly and trustworthy, there also exist many charming scoundrels and stodgy saints. Many further finer distinctions can be made. Thus, there is inevitably a trade-off between parsimony and precision. The optimal balance of simplicity and specificity depends on the purpose. For example, detailing specific social goals and incentives can yield a vivid appreciation of what motivates a particular person (e.g., as one might do in a clinical case report), whereas using the broad brushstrokes of “agency” and “communion” can facilitate the integration of insights from different domains and programs of research (e.g., as I hope to do in this paper).

Measuring Agentic and Communal Motives

Agentic and communal social motives can be assessed by either implicit or explicit (self- or peer-report) measures; each measurement approach has strengths and weaknesses (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989).

Implicit motives

Implicit motives are automatic dispositions to value certain types of experiences or incentives (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2010). Implicit motives are typically assessed with the Picture–Story Exercise – a descendant of the Thematic Apperception Test – in which respondents write brief stories in response to picture cues, and the stories are then coded for motive imagery by trained scorers (McClelland et al., 1989). The implicit motives most frequently studied are the agentic motives of power and achievement, and the communal motives of affiliation and intimacy. People with strong achievement needs value meeting or exceeding standards of mastery or excellence (McClelland & Koestner, 1992). People with strong power needs value controlling, influencing, and impressing others (Winter, 1973). People with strong affiliation needs value forming and sustaining harmonious relationships (Koestner & McClelland, 1992). People with strong intimacy needs value warm, communicative connections with others (McAdams, 1992). Research finds small-to-moderate positive associations between intimacy and affiliation (the two communal motives), and between power and achievement (the two agentic motives), but each motive also shows distinct associations with validity criteria (McAdams, 1992; Slabbinck, De Houwer, & Van Kenhove, 2013).

Excellent overviews of the implicit motives literature are available in edited volumes by Smith (1992) and Schultheiss and Brunstein (2010). Here, I will simply note that the research supports two unsurprising generalizations. First, people tend to behave in ways that satisfy their motives. For example, studies have found that people with strong achievement needs were particularly likely to persist and excel on tasks for which they felt responsible and expected to receive feedback (McClelland & Koestner, 1992); people with strong power needs were particularly likely to seek attention by taking risks and flaunting prestigious possessions (Fodor, 2010); people with strong affiliation needs were particularly likely to prefer interactive and group activities (Weinberger, Cotler, & Fishman, 2010); and people with strong intimacy needs were particularly likely to make self-disclosures and nurture relationships (McAdams, 1992). Second, people tend to be more attentive and reactive to events relevant to their needs. For example, studies have found that people with strong power or intimacy motives attended more to facial expressions indicating dominance or friendliness, respectively (Schultheiss & Hale, 2007); and the effects of satisfying or frustrating relatedness needs on relationship satisfaction were stronger for individuals with stronger affiliation needs, while the effects of satisfying or frustrating needs for competence on job satisfaction were greater for individuals with stronger achievement needs (Hofer & Busch, 2011).

Self-attributed motives

An explicit measure of agentic and communal motives is the Circumplex Scales of Interpersonal Values (CSIV; Locke, 2000, 2011), which measures the value someone places on enacting or experiencing behaviors associated with each octant of the interpersonal circumplex. As shown in Figure 1, the interpersonal circumplex is a circular model of interpersonal attributes defined by a vertical agentic axis ranging from status, dominance, and power to passivity, timidity, and powerlessness, and a horizontal communal axis ranging from warmth, friendliness, and intimacy to coldness, disconnection, and indifference (Gurtman, 2009; Horowitz et al., 2006; Wiggins, 2003). Each CSIV item is a goal that can be mapped onto a particular circumplex location, reflecting a particular blend of agency and communion; for example, the goal to “appear confident” is agentic, the goal to “feel connected to them” is communal, and the goal to “express myself openly” is both agentic and communal. Goals that are geometrically closer on the circumplex are more likely to co-occur; for example, the goal to “feel connected” is more likely to co-occur with the goal to “express myself openly” than with the goal to “appear confident”. The agentic and communal motives assessed by the CSIV have demonstrated convergent validity with measures of agentic and communal traits, problems, and sensitivities as well as implicit power and intimacy needs (Hopwood et al., 2011; Locke, 2000). Studies using the CSIV have found that people with stronger communal motives were more likely to express satisfaction with dyadic interactions (Locke & Sadler, 2007), construe potentially ambiguous partner behaviors as reflecting partner responsiveness (Turan & Horowitz, 2010), conform to injunctive norms (Locke et al., 2015), and judge harshly anyone who transgresses communal norms (Kammrath & Scholer, 2011).

The Interpersonal Goals Inventory for Children (IGI-C; Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005) and revised IGI-C (IGI-CR; Trucco, Wright, & Colder, 2013) have adapted the CSIV for use with children and adolescents; studies employing these inventories have found that agentic and communal motives predict prosocial and aggressive behaviors, peer perceptions, and friendship quality, among other outcomes (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014). The Circumplex Scales of Intergroup Goals (CSIG; Locke, 2014) has modified and extended the CSIV to assess agentic and communal goals for interactions between groups; studies employing the CSIG have found that stronger communal intergroup goals and weaker agentic intergroup goals predict preferences for cooperative rather than competitive resolutions of intergroup conflicts (Locke, 2014). Note that in the names of the various adaptations and translations of the CSIV, the term “values” has been replaced with either “goals” or “motives” (e.g., Thomas, Locke, & Strauß, 2012) because many social

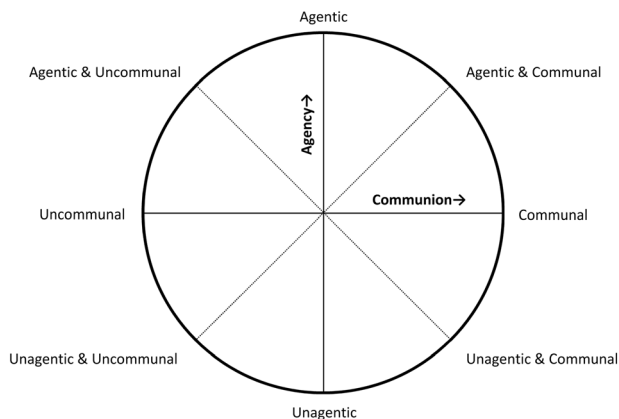


Figure 1 The interpersonal circumplex.

scientists now typically reserve the term “values” to denote more abstract “guiding principles”, such as those assessed by the Schwartz Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992). The Agentic and Communal Values scales (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012) are a measure specifically designed to measure abstract guiding principles that can be classified as either agentic (e.g., achievement, competence, and status) or communal (e.g., civility, compassion, and loyalty).

Agentic and Communal Motives – Risks and Rewards

The measures of social motives reviewed above are designed to measure variations in social motives across persons and situations. But why should social motives vary across persons and situations? Should we not all wish to experience both agency and communion all the time? After all, agency and communion are clearly beneficial. People who demonstrate agency are more apt to receive recognition for their distinctive skills, assets, and accomplishments; people who demonstrate communion are more apt to receive assistance, support, and protection; and people who demonstrate agency and communion are more apt to receive invitations to enter into cooperative economic and romantic relationships with others.

Moreover, feeling accepted and respected enhances self-esteem (Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001), whereas threats to communion (inclusion, acceptance) or status (competence, respect) activate cardiovascular and endocrine threat responses and undermine mental and physical well-being (Smith & Jordan, 2015). Indeed, self-determination theory proposes that satisfying the agentic and communal needs for autonomy (to freely choose one’s actions), competence (to be accomplished and able to master challenges), and relatedness (to connect with and be accepted by others) is essential for every person’s optimal adjustment (Deci & Ryan, 2000); and there is in fact evidence that satisfying competence and relatedness needs is positively related to well-being and psychological adjustment across a diversity of cultures (Church et al., 2013).

Perhaps one reason individuals differ in their propensities to approach or avoid agency and communion is that individuals differ in their general propensities to approach potential rewards or avoid potential costs (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Indeed, extraversion – the five-factor model trait most positively associated with approach motivation – reflects dispositional tendencies to approach both agency and communion (Corr, DeYoung, & McNaughton, 2013; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003). But since stronger avoidance motives are associated with worse emotional and physical well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Elliot & Sheldon, 1998) and worse relationship outcomes (Gable & Impett, 2012), we still have not answered the following question: Why are avoidance motives so often so potent in so many?

The basic answer is that any significant endeavor – including the pursuit of agency and communion – can incur costs as well as rewards. Potential costs of enhancing agency include undertaking draining or risky aspirations and competitions, or being perceived as excessively or illegitimately agentic (e.g., presumptuous and pushy) and engendering malicious envy (Križan & Smith, 2014; van de Ven et al., 2014). Potential costs of enhancing communion include potentially contracting pathogens or costly obligations to aide and protect others – others who may be unwilling or unable to confer equivalent benefits in return (Leary & Cottrell, 2013). Because agency and communion can have costs, motives to avoid agency (e.g., to withdraw from conflicts and costly enterprises) or communion (e.g., to limit vulnerabilities and commitments to others) can also be adaptive.

Agentic and communal social motives carry risks in part because we need others to satisfy them; and others may or may not grant us the status or love we seek from them (Foa & Foa, 1980; Wiggins, 1991). Others may fail to satisfy our bids for communion or agency because their own personalities are too cold (e.g., schizoid), controlling (e.g., narcissistic), or both (e.g., antisocial). However, even if humanity were somehow cleansed of personality disorders and ill intentions, agency and communion would still be inherently limited resources, and thus

agentic and communal motives would still at times be frustrated. With respect to agency, in many situations there can be only one “winner” – for example, who wins the gold medal, obtains the promotion, or marries the prince or princess. Likewise, with respect to communion, we cannot offer friendship, trust, support, or physical intimacy to everyone; instead, we grant communion to – and thus receive it from – some people and not others.

The likelihood of a person’s agentic and communal motives being satisfied versus frustrated partly depends on that person. For example, the likelihood that my competing for a position of status or power will yield more rewards than costs depends on whether my personal and interpersonal resources are superior to those of my competitors. Likewise, the likelihood that my entering into a communal relationship will yield more rewards than costs depends on whether my personal and interpersonal resources make others unlikely to reject or exploit me. Thus, people who enjoy assets (such as being capable, attractive, or well-connected) that enable bids for agency or communion to be successful may typically show stronger communal or agentic approach motives (Lukaszewski, 2013).

A history of frustrated bids for agency or communion may eventually cause individuals to reflexively avoid rather than approach agency and communion. Such a history may explain why individuals with less secure attachment styles express stronger avoidance and weaker approach social motives – in sum, expressing a more ambivalent or indifferent pattern of social motives – with romantic partners (Gable & Impett, 2012; Locke, 2008; MacDonald, Locke, Spielmann, & Joel, 2013). On the other hand, threatening or frustrating an important need can – in the moment – focus attention on getting that need fulfilled. For example, it has been found that experiencing social rejection can intensify interest in making friends and working with others (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007).

When someone is feeling threatened, we can offer social support that enhances agency (self-efficacy, problem-solving, and action) or communion (connection, compassion, and understanding) (Trobst, 1999). Research has shown that because threats to communion (e.g., feeling isolated, misunderstood, or rejected) activate communal motives (to be connected, understood, and embraced), whereas threats to agency (e.g., feeling incompetent, inferior, or powerless) tend to increase agentic motives (to feel competent, accomplished, and empowered), speakers disclosing a communal problem were more satisfied with communal than agentic support, whereas speakers disclosing an agentic problem were more satisfied with agentic than communal support (Horowitz et al., 2001). Applying similar logic, the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013) suggests that because interpersonal or intergroup transgressions threaten the victim’s agency (e.g., power and respect) and the perpetrator’s communion (e.g., morality and likability), in future interactions, the victims will be particularly intent on experiencing agency and the perpetrators will be particularly intent on experiencing communion. In support of this model, a series of studies found that across diverse contexts in which one group was unfairly disadvantaged or mistreated by another group, members of the disadvantaged group expressed stronger agentic intergroup motives (e.g., it is important that “we are assertive” and “they see us as capable”), whereas members of the advantaged group expressed stronger communal intergroup motives (e.g., it is important that “we appreciate what they have to offer” and “we show concern for their welfare”) (Aydin, Ullrich, Locke, Siem, & Shnabel, 2015).

Interplay Between Agentic and Communal Motives

Another source of constraints on the pursuit of agency and communion are conflicts between agentic and communal motives. For example, agentic motives to achieve and surpass others can clash with communal motives to make others feel equally valued and included; consequently,

people – especially those with strong communal needs – may conceal or minimize their successes (Horowitz et al., 2006; Zell & Exline, 2014). More broadly, Schwartz (1992) contended that a natural tension exists between the agentic values of power and achievement and the communal values of benevolence and universalism. In support of this contention, power (in the absence of other, mitigating social motives) has been found to undermine interpersonal compassion and sensitivity (van Kleef et al., 2008). Testosterone, likewise, may stimulate agentic motives but suppress communal motives. For example, research has found that men with higher testosterone levels expressed weaker communal motives – as well as stronger agentic motives – on the CSIV (Turan, Guo, Boggiano, & Bedgood, 2014) and were more prone to antisocial behavior (Johnson, Leedom, & Muhtadie, 2012).

Both communal motives to fit in and agentic motives to stand out can contribute to an individual being welcomed and valued by others; however, the optimal balance between fitting in and standing out may vary across individuals and cultures depending on the importance they place on agency versus communion. For example, at the individual level, Gebauer et al. (2013) found that agentic individuals were more inclined to stand out (by expressing distinctive attitudes and actions), while communal individuals were more inclined to fit in (by expressing normative attitudes and actions). At the cultural level, Locke, Zheng, and Smith (2014) found that Chinese tended to express personality judgments that established commonalities among group members, whereas Americans tended to express judgments that affirmed how group members differed from each other, and these cultural differences were largely explained by differences in collectivistic and individualistic values.

Agency and communion during social comparisons

My own interest in the interplay between agentic and communal motives was catalyzed by my observations of everyday social comparisons (Locke, 2003, 2014). Social comparisons involve locating oneself *above*, *below*, *close to*, or *distant from* a target person or persons with respect to some characteristic (e.g., “I can outrun them”, “she writes faster than I can”, “he shares my love of dancing”, and “we grew up in different worlds”). Social comparisons are not dispassionate assessments; they are social acts shaped by social motives. For example, studies have found that people with stronger communal motives are particularly likely to believe that close others and ingroup members are similar to the self (Locke, Craig, Baik, & Gohil, 2012), feel happy and connected after noticing similarities between the self and others (Locke, 2003), judge upward and downward comparisons (that locate oneself below or above others) as harmful (Locke, 2003), and feel discomfort with being the target of upward comparisons (Zell & Exline, 2014).

Noticing how close others are superior can feel particularly uncomfortable. Cognitively, emotionally, or physically distancing yourself from the superior other may protect your self-esteem (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997; Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000; Tesser, 1988), but at the cost of undermining communion with the other person. An alternative strategy that can satisfy both agentic and communal needs is to highlight distinctive connections between the self and the superior other, thereby – via association or assimilation – enhancing one’s own status (Cialdini et al., 1976; McFarland, Buehler, & MacKay, 2001). Romantic partners are particularly apt to respond to each other’s successes with pride rather than envy and to each other’s failures with compassion rather than *schadenfreude* (Lockwood & Pinkus, 2014).

Comparing yourself with another’s undesirable attributes can also evoke a dilemma (Locke, 2005). Highlighting how you are similar to the other person may satisfy communal motives but frustrate agentic motives if it insinuates that you share (or might eventually share) the other person’s undesirable qualities. Noticing how you are superior may satisfy agentic motives but frustrate communal motives by distancing you from the other person. A lamentably common way

for people to make downward comparisons without completely frustrating communal motives is to join together in denigrating another person or group, thereby fostering feelings of shared superiority; this strategy apparently can be quite successful in middle school, where students who engage in this type of relational aggression express stronger agentic motives and are more popular with their peers (Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014).

Agency and communion across the lifespan

The dynamic interplay between communion and agency occurs throughout our lives. Due to the obvious survival benefits, we are born equipped with powerful communal motives to remain close and connected to our caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). As described in Erikson's (1950) model of psychosocial development, if caregivers reliably reciprocate our bids for communion, we develop during infancy a secure attachment or sense of basic trust, which provides a foundation or safe base for the expression of agency. Specifically, during childhood, as we learn to satisfy agentic drives for autonomy, initiative, and industry within an increasingly complex social world, our developing ego achieves the virtues of willpower, purpose, and competence. Throughout this time, we refer to admired others as models (Bandura, 1986); successful modeling satisfies communal and agentic motives by evoking feelings of connection and pride and by helping us to become more worthy of liking and respect ourselves. As we approach adulthood, the challenge becomes integrating – ideally through hopeful, industrious exploration – our multifarious competencies and identifications into a coherent identity (Erikson, 1950). As perhaps both cause and consequence of this process, as we traverse adolescence, we tend to become less preoccupied with unagentic and uncommunal goals, such as avoiding being ridiculed or shamed by peers (Trucco, Wright, & Colder, 2014).

As we enter adulthood, agentic motives (and, not coincidentally, testosterone levels) reach their zenith. Interestingly, agentic motives and mating motives are closely linked; for example, greater levels of power and power motives predict more sexual thoughts and behaviors and perceptions of sexual interest from others (Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, 2008; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Schultheiss, Dargel, & Rohde, 2003). The link is especially clear in males; for example, among males, activating sexual motives elevates testosterone and intrasexual competition and attention-seeking behavior, and testosterone levels are generally higher among men seeking mates than among men in established relationships (Roney & Von Hippel, 2010; van Anders, Goldey, & Kuo, 2011).

Although adaptive benefits accrue from devoting effort either to mating or to parenting, because resources are limited, tensions can arise between devoting resources to producing more offspring versus devoting resources to nurturing existing offspring (Fletcher et al., 2015; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). While testosterone facilitates mating, it may inhibit bonding and nurturing (van Anders et al., 2011). For example, higher testosterone levels predict less positive responses to infant cries (Fleming, Corter, Stallings, & Steiner, 2002). The reverse is also true: Communion can inhibit testosterone. For example, committing to a romantic partner and becoming an involved father can lower testosterone levels (Gettler, McDade, Feranil, & Kuzawa, 2011; Gray & Campbell, 2009). Lower testosterone levels, in turn, have been shown to predict being less interested in alternative partners and more committed to your current partner, and your partner feeling (perhaps as a consequence of your investment) more committed to and satisfied with the relationship (see Wardecker, Smith, Edelstein, & Loving, 2015).

More generally, during adulthood, our focus tends to shift from acquiring agency to exercising agency in the service of communion. For example, surveys indicate that as we transition from young adulthood to mid-adulthood, the importance of personal success and power

typically decreases, and the importance of protecting and caring for others typically increases (Robinson, 2013). Throughout adulthood, we are likely to participate in many relationships that entail employing our superior agency to assist others (i.e., relationships that are unequal yet communal), including personal relationships such as parent and mentor and the diversity of professional relationships in which others ask us to help them learn, repair, heal, or build something. Although our evolutionary family tree suggests that communal motives – and the yoking of agentic motives to communal aims – may have originally been narrowly focused on protecting and nurturing vulnerable offspring, in our own species, the scope of communal concerns has grown considerably more expansive and flexible (Tomasello, 2014): Humans express and fulfill their agentic and communal motives by making distinctive contributions to an indefinite variety of individuals, groups, and collective endeavors.

Harnessing agency (your accumulated mental, physical, or material resources) towards communal aims is an essential element of what Erikson (1950) considered the critical challenge of adulthood – namely, generativity versus stagnation – and is also a core element of the prototype of the heroic person (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015). The reverse is not true: Individuals who use communal means (e.g., friends, family, and favors) primarily to achieve agentic ends (e.g., wealth, status, and power) may be successful (Hawley, 2014) but are unlikely to be extolled as moral paragons. Rather, individuals deemed moral exemplars manifest compelling needs for both agency and communion, but with their agency deliberately directed towards communal ends (Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, & Dunlop, 2012).

Conclusions

Agency and communion are the cardinal axes along which we map and chart the course of our social lives. Although agency and communion are conceptually distinct and psychometrically separable dimensions, in everyday life, agentic and communal motives are intertwined – sometimes in competition and sometimes in synergy. The ebb and flow of life along each dimension – for example, as people enter and exit relationships or rise and fall from power – is certainly fascinating; but just as living for either agency alone or communion alone yields an impoverished existence (Bakan, 1966; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Wiggins, 1991), viewing others through the lens of either agency alone or communion alone yields a limited, unidimensional understanding of their lives. Viewing others as communal invites us to like them; viewing others as agentic invites us to respect them; but only viewing others as simultaneously agentic and communal invites us to experience them as fully human (Cuddy et al., 2008). In particular, we may most clearly appreciate our own and others' complexity and humanity in the interplay of the two motivational forces – in our juggling and balancing the sundry costs and benefits of agency (standing out, getting ahead) and communion (getting along, fitting in) – both in everyday life and across the lifespan. Of course, agency and communion are admittedly abstract dimensions, and thus, even studying social phenomena from the perspective of agency and communion often yields conclusions that, although at least two-dimensional, nonetheless lack depth and nuance. On the other hand, I hope the current paper shows how the basic social motives of agency and communion have provided a fruitful foundation for launching and guiding programs of research and for synthesizing diverse insights concerning human sociality into a cumulative corpus of knowledge.

Short Biography

Kenneth Locke (PhD, Stanford University) is a Licensed Psychologist and Professor of Psychology at the University of Idaho and past president of the Society for Interpersonal Theory and

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Note

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