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AGENTIC AND COMMUNAL TRAITS

**Are there Systematic Differences in Describing Self vs. Others  
in Terms of Agentic and Communal Traits?**

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### **Abstract**

Two studies test the proposition that the description with traits pertaining to the fundamental dimensions of social judgment (agency and communion) is different for the self vs. for others. We predicted that people would (1) describe both themselves and others with more communal than agentic terms; (2) describe themselves with more agentic traits than other persons; and (3) describe others with more communal traits than themselves. Study 1 analyzed free descriptions of the self and a friend and found support for all three hypotheses. Study 2 applied a trait rating procedure. Supporting hypotheses (2) and (3) participants rated their own agentic traits higher and their communal traits lower than those of a friend. Hypothesis (1) was supported for the friend, but not for the self. We conclude that people focus on different content in the perception of themselves and their perception of others and discuss implications of this finding for social interactions and communication.

## **Are there systematic Differences in Describing Self vs. Others in Terms of Agentic and Communal Traits?**

In communication and social interaction, we can always distinguish between the perspectives of actor or self and observer or other (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971). These perspectives have important implications, for example for causal attributions, such that people interpret their own behaviour more externally in terms of the situation, whereas they interpret the behaviour of others more internally in terms of personality (e.g., Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973; for more recent theoretical developments, see Malle, Knobe, & Nelson, 2007). The present two studies address whether the perspectives of self vs. other also influence the trait content dominating person perception. More specifically, we test whether perceptions of the self and of others are dominated by different trait content.

Originating with Bakan (1966) the superordinate labels of *agency* and *communion* have helped to frame key issues in social psychology (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Wojciszke, Baryła, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011), in personality psychology (Wiggins, 1991, Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008), in psychotherapy (Kiesler & Auerbach, 2003), and in cultural psychology (Phalet & Pope, 1997; Ybarra, Chan, Park, Burnstein, Monin, & Stanik., 2008). Accordingly, agency and communion have been called the “fundamental dimensions” (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Judd et al., 2005) or the “Big Two” (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008). Agency refers to strivings to individuate, to expand the self, and to efficiently attain one’s goals; agency comprises attributes such as “strong”, “competent”, “active”, and “decisive”. Communion refers to strivings to integrate the self in a larger social unit and comprises traits such as “warm”, “cooperative”, “trustworthy”, and “friendly”. Agency may briefly be labeled as “getting ahead” and communion as “getting along” (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008).

A core distinction between agentic vs. communal attributes is their self-profitability vs. other-profitability (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Vonk, 1999; Peeters, 1992, 2008; Peeters, Cornelissen, & Pandelaere, 2006). *Self-profitable traits* are qualities which are directly and

unconditionally profitable or harmful for the trait possessor; self-profitable traits correspond to agentic attributes. Other people may also benefit from self-profitable traits, but this depends on the trait possessor's goals and intentions. *Other-profitable traits* are directly beneficial for other people or directly harmful for them; other-profitable traits correspond to communal attributes. The trait possessor may also profit from other-profitable traits, but this—again—depends on his/ her goals and intentions. Hence, the adaptive value of agentic and communal attributes is inherently linked to *perspective*, that is, whether these attributes are perceived from the perspective of the trait possessor or the perspective of another person.

In our double perspective model (DPM) we have recently proposed that the basic dimensions of agency and communion are differently linked to the perspective of self vs. other (Abele, Bruckmüller, & Wojciszke, 2012; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008; Wojciszke et al., 2011). In the observer perspective, i.e., when interpreting others' behaviour, people first of all want to know whether a target can be approached or should be avoided (Fiske et al., 2007; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990) and hence, they direct their attention towards others' communal traits (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011). In the self perspective communal content matters as well, because communal traits are essential to establish and maintain benevolent relationships with others. However, in the self-perspective people usually focus on the achievement of current action goals and on efficiently pursuing these goals and hence, agentic content is more important in this perspective than in the observer perspective. Observers first of all want to "get along" with the other person. Actors (self perspective) also want to „get along“, but they especially want to „get ahead“ with their aims and goals. The DPM, hence, says that agentic traits are more important in the actor/self perspective whereas communal traits are more important in the observer/other perspective.

### **Perspective-dependent evaluations of agentic and communal traits**

Previous research has shown that agentic traits are rated as self-profitable and communal traits are rated as other-profitable. Abele and Wojciszke (2007, Study 1), for instance, showed that the more a trait pertained to agency, the more it was perceived as serving the interests of the trait possessor, not the interests of others. Conversely, the more

a trait pertained to communion, the more it was perceived as serving the interests of others, but not the interests of the trait possessor. The fourth study of this series (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) asked participants to rate the importance of a number of agentic and communal traits both with respect to the self and with respect to other persons (a friend, an acquaintance). Participants rated agentic traits as more important for the self than for others. However, the importance of communal traits was rated as similarly high for self as for others. Also supporting the DPM, in a recent series of studies (Wojciszke, et al., 2011) we found that self-esteem was strongly connected with self-ascribed agency, but not with self-ascribed communion. Conversely, evaluations of others were strongly correlated with their presumed communion, but not with their presumed agency. Cislak and Wojciszke (2008) showed that participants inferred agency when they read about a politician who was acting in the service of self-interests, but they inferred communion when they read about identical actions of a politician in the service of others' interests. Abele and colleagues (Abele, 2003; Abele, Rupperecht, & Wojciszke, 2008; Uchronski, Abele, & Bruckmüller, 2012) found that a person's self-ascribed agency increased when his or her actions had served self-interests (success at a task; success in one's occupational career), whereas self-ascribed communion increased after serving other-interests (being empathetic towards another person).

Findings on stereotypes of groups (the stereotype content model, Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) as well as on gender stereotypes (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002) also fit our reasoning: Stereotyping of groups as warm or cold (communal traits) depends on a group's competition with the perceiver's own group, that is, on the potential conflict with the interests of the observer and his/ her in-group. Stereotyping of groups as competent vs. incompetent (agentic traits) follows from a group's position in the status-power hierarchy, that is, it depends on the more or less efficient pursuit of self-interests of the respective group. Regarding gender stereotypes, the agentic, male stereotype is connected with roles that foster the interests of the self (bread-winner, high status), whereas the communal, female stereotype is connected with roles that foster other-interest (care provider, low status; cf. Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996).

## **Present Research**

Taken together, these studies suggest that perspective matters in evaluating traits pertaining to the fundamental content dimensions of agency and communion. None of these studies, however, tested the hypothesis that people may use traits from the two content dimensions differently when describing themselves vs. describing another person. We here present two studies testing the hypothesis that the differences found in evaluations of self vs. others might also show up when describing the self vs. others.

We predicted that (1) people describe both themselves and others with more communal than agentic qualities because “getting along” is a major aim both for the self and for interactions with others. We further predicted that people (2) describe themselves with more agentic qualities than others because “getting ahead” is more important in the self perspective than in the observer perspective; and that they ascribe (3) more communal qualities to others than to the self because “getting along” is more important in the observer perspective than in the self perspective.

We tested these hypotheses both with standard rating scale procedures and with a free a response format. Previous studies in this field of research mainly applied rating scale procedures (Abele, et al., 2012; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008; Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2008; Fiske et al., 2002, 2007; Judd et al., 2005; Ybarra et al., 2008; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). There are, however, several examples in social-psychological research in which phenomena were not invariant with respect to the methodology applied, specifically actor-observer differences in causal attributions (Malle, 2006). Our first study thus applied a free response format; our second study applied a rating-scale methodology.

### **Study 1**

We asked our participants to describe themselves with up to eight traits that they regarded as most characteristic. We also asked them to describe a friend in the same manner. The descriptions were later content-analyzed by coders unaware of the hypotheses of the study and unaware of the target (description of self or description of a friend). Coders

analyzed both content and valence of the generated descriptions (similarly see Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Diehl, Owen, & Youngblade, 2004; Uchrowski, 2008).

Regarding content we differentiated between positive and negative agency and communion traits, and we further introduced a distinction that was proposed by Peeters (2008). This author suggested that traits are not only self-profitable or other-profitable (as well as positive and negative), but that self-profitable vs. other-profitable traits can express this characteristic to a high degree, i.e., the trait is self-profitable (for instance, “dominant”) or other-profitable (for instance, “helpful”) or it lacks self-profitability (for instance, “indecisive”) or other-profitability respectively (for instance, “rude”). This distinction is different from the distinction between positive and negative traits because there are instances conceivable in which a “lack of” trait may be regarded as valence neutral or positive (e.g., “cautious”) and vice versa a “high degree” trait may be evaluated as neutral or negative (e.g., “dominant”). Our hypotheses pertained to the “high degree” agentic and communal trait ascriptions, but we also tested the “lack of” ascriptions in an explorative manner.

## **Method**

**Participants and procedure.** A total of 118 students (77 women, 41 men; age range from 19 to 33 years,  $M = 22$ ) participated voluntarily and without payment. We collected the data in two large group testing sessions set apart by a one-week interval.

We instructed the participants to think about what type of person they are and then to list up to 8 traits that are characteristic for themselves. We also asked them to imagine a friend whom they know well but who is not very close to them and to write down his/ her gender and the initial of the person’s first name. We then asked them to list up to 8 traits typical for this friend.

**Design and Measures.** The design was two (order of targets: self first, friend first) by two (described target: self, friend) factorial with repeated measures on the second factor. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two order conditions. Dependent measures were the content and the valence of the traits generated for self and friend.

**Content analysis of the generated traits.** Two independent judges unaware of the hypotheses and of the target (self vs. friend) for which the respective traits had been listed, classified them into agentic vs. communal traits subdivided into “high” (agency, communion) vs. “lack of” (agency, communion).

The definition of *communion* was: “Communion refers to a person’s striving to be part of a community, to establish close relationships, and to give up individual needs for the common good. Communion manifests itself in empathy and understanding, in caring and cooperation, as well as in moral behavior“

*Lack of communion* was defined as traits that denominate negative interpersonal behavior both with respect to sociability and with respect to morality. Examples given were “impatient” or “unreliable”.

The definition of *agency* was: “Agency refers to a person’s striving to express one’s individuality, to assert oneself, to attain individual goals, and to control the environment. Agency manifests itself in assertiveness and leadership behavior, in achievement, in a striving for success, and in autonomy.”

*Lack of agency* was defined as traits that denominate insecurity, external control, and a lack of goal orientation. Examples given were “chaotic” or “indecisive”.

Traits or descriptions that could not be classified into one of these four content categories were assigned the category “other” (for instance, “sportive”, “fashionable”, or “pretty”).

Judges also categorized all descriptions as positive, neutral, or negative. It is important to note that these evaluations were performed independently of the content assignments and accordingly, there could be instances in which a “lack of” agency or communion trait was positively valued, or a “high” agency or communion trait was negatively valued (for instance, “aggressive” is both high agency and negative).

Judges agreed on 83% of the content assignments and they agreed on 92% of the valence assignments. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

## Results



**Preliminary analyses.** We first tested whether participants' gender had an influence on the results. This was not the case and we did not consider gender in further analyses. We then tested whether order of presentation (self first vs. other first) had an influence. We found that irrespective of target (self or friend) participants listed more traits in their first description ( $M = 7.01$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) than in their second description ( $M = 6.60$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(117) = 3.36$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .33$ . Since frequencies of both order conditions were the same and since order did not interact with the listed traits' content and valence we also did not consider order in our further analyses.

**Generated traits.** Participants generated  $M = 13.61$  ( $SD = 2.10$ ) traits overall. Coders classified 51.36% of these traits as communal, 33.29% as agentic, and 15.35% as "other". All in all almost 85% of the traits generated could be classified as agentic or communal (including both "high" and "lack of" variants).

Participants generated the same amount of traits for the self ( $M = 6.78$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) as for the friend ( $M = 6.83$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $t < 1$ . The most frequently listed traits for the self were *ambitious*, *helpful/cooperative*, *friendly*, *sportive*, and *open*; the most frequently listed traits for the friend were *helpful/cooperative*, *trustworthy/dependable*, *intelligent*, *open*, and *cheerful*.<sup>1</sup>

**Positive, negative, and neutral traits for self vs. friend.** We conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with target (self vs. friend) and trait valence (positive, neutral, negative traits) as within participants' factors. There was no target effect,  $F < 1$ , but a highly significant valence effect,  $F(2, 234) = 426.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .785$ , with more positive than negative than neutral traits mentioned. The analysis also revealed a significant interaction of valence by target,  $F(2, 234) = 6.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .052$ . Participants described the friend more favorably than themselves. They listed more positive traits for the friend ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than for themselves ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $t(117) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = .25$ ; and they listed less negative traits for the friend ( $M = 1.05$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than for themselves ( $M = 1.43$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(117) = 3.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .34$ . The number of neutral traits did not differ between self ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) and friend ( $M = 0.84$ ,  $SD = .92$ ),  $t < 1$ .

**Agentic and communal traits for self and friend.** We conducted separate analyses for traits indicating agency or communion vs. for traits indicating a lack of agency or communion.

The repeated measures ANOVA with target (self vs. friend) and trait content (agentic and communal traits) as within participants factors revealed no target effect,  $F(1, 117) = 1.96, p > .16$ ; but a highly significant content effect,  $F(1, 117) = 45.46, p < .001$ , which was qualified by a significant target by content interaction,  $F(1, 117) = 22.02, p < .001$  (see Figure 1). Supporting Hypothesis (1), participants listed more communal than agentic traits, both for themselves,  $t(117) = 2.99, p < .01, d = .55$ , and for the friend,  $t(117) = 7.84, p < .001, d = 1.45$ . Supporting Hypothesis (2), they listed more agentic traits for themselves ( $M = 2.02, SD = 1.21$ ), than for the friend ( $M = 1.60, SD = 1.23$ ),  $t(117) = 3.06, p < .01, d = .57$ ; and supporting Hypothesis (3) they listed more communal traits for the friend ( $M = 3.25, SD = 1.56$ ) than for themselves ( $M = 2.59, SD = 1.33$ ),  $t(117) = 4.47, p < .001, d = .83$ .

The respective ANOVA with target (self vs. friend) and "lack of" content (lack of agency vs. communion) as within participants factors resulted in no significant target effect,  $F(1, 117) = 3.45, p < .07, \eta^2 = .029$ , no significant content effect,  $F(1, 117) = 2.84, p < .10, \eta^2 = .024$ , but a significant target by content interaction,  $F(1, 117) = 4.49, p < .04, \eta^2 = .037$  (see Figure 2). Participants described themselves with more traits expressing a lack of communion ( $M = .70, SD = .87$ ) than the friend ( $M = .45, SD = .79$ ),  $t(117) = 2.68, p < .01, d = .49$ ; and they described themselves with more attributes expressing a lack of communion than with attributes expressing a lack of agency ( $M = .43, SD = .69$ ),  $t(117) = 2.42, p < .02, d = .45$ . There were no differences in lack of agency descriptions of self vs. friend ( $M = .48, SD = .64$ ),  $t < 1$ ; as well as lack of agency vs. lack of communion descriptions of the friend,  $t < 1$ .

**Content and valence.** We now compared the favorability of the generated agentic and communal traits. We found that the communal traits were more positive than the agentic ones. The percentage of positive agentic traits for the friend ( $M = .54, SD = .39$ ) was lower than the percentage of positive communal traits for the friend ( $M = .83, SD = .26$ ),  $t(117) = 6.64, p < .001, d = .89$ . The same was true for the traits ascribed to the self: The percentage

of positive agentic traits was again lower ( $M = .61$ ,  $SD = .35$ ) than the percentage of positive communal traits ( $M = .74$ ,  $SD = .29$ ),  $t(117) = 2.97$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .41$ .

## Discussion

Study 1 showed that almost 85% of the characteristics generated in an open-response format could be assigned to the basic content dimensions of communion and agency. Supporting our hypotheses, participants described both the friend and themselves with more communal than agentic characteristics (H1); they described themselves with more agentic characteristics than the friend (H2); and they described the friend with more communal characteristics than themselves (H3). We had not stated specific hypotheses regarding “lack of agency” and “lack of communion” characteristics. The findings reveal that participants generally listed few “lack of” characteristics. Interestingly, they listed more “lack of communion” characteristics for the self than all other “lack of” characteristics. Finally, we found that people described themselves less favorably than they described a friend. Moreover, participants listed more positive communion traits than positive agency traits.

## Study 2

Study 1 supported our hypotheses with a methodology that allowed maximal freedom for participants' answers. The free-response format had the advantage that participants could write whatever they wanted to. However, it also has two disadvantages. First, it may be argued that people do not ascribe personality characteristics to themselves and others in an “either-or” fashion, but that they rather ascribe “more” or “less” of those characteristics. Second, when people are allowed to write down whatever they want to, possible confounds of the variables in question such as valence can only be controlled for post hoc. Study 2 was therefore meant to replicate the findings of Study 1 with a standard trait-rating methodology and with items that were carefully preselected with respect to valence. The design was the same as in Study 1: Participants were asked to rate both themselves and a friend with regard to agentic and communal traits and the order of descriptions varied between participants. We expected participants to overall endorse communal traits more than agentic ones (H1); to

endorse agentic traits more for the self than for a friend (H2); and to endorse communal traits more for the friend than for the self (H3). We used positive trait words only.

## Method

**Pretest.** We selected the traits based on several pre-studies (see also Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Abele, Uchronski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008) in which participants had rated the favorability of the traits and the degree of agency and of communion they expressed on 7-point scales each. We selected 12 agency and 12 communion traits that were equally favorable (agency traits:  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ; communion traits:  $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ,  $t < 1$ ) and that clearly differed with respect to content (agency traits: agency rating  $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ; communion rating  $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ,  $d = 5.04$ ; communion traits: agency rating  $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ , communion rating  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ,  $d = 8.00$ ). Agency and communion words were also balanced with respect to word frequency in written language.

**Participants and design.** A total of 74 (45 female, 29 male) students at a German university, mean age 23.8 years ( $SD = 1.74$ ) participated in the study voluntarily and without payment. We collected the data in a group-testing session. The study had a 2 (content dimension: agency, communion)  $\times$  2 (target: self, friend) by two (order of completing the questionnaire: self first, friend first) design with the first two factors varying within participants.

**Procedure.** We asked our participants to describe themselves and a friend by means of a provided list of traits. We instructed them to choose a friend they are well acquainted with, but who is not a very close friend. In the friend first condition participants first indicated this friend's gender and age and then rated how descriptive 12 agentic traits and 12 communal traits were for this friend from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Afterwards participants rated the same traits with respect to the self. In the self first condition participants first rated the self and afterwards they rated the friend. There were six different random orders in which the traits appeared and participants never rated the traits for self and friend in the same order of appearance.

**Materials.** The agency scale consisted of 12 items (*self-confident, consistent, determined, intelligent, rational, independent, assertive, competent, persistent, active, efficient, energetic*; German: *selbstsicher, konsequent, zielstrebig, intelligent, rational, unabhängig, durchsetzungsfähig, kompetent, ausdauernd, tatkräftig, leistungsfähig, energisch*). The 12 items of the communion scale were *generous, helpful, affectionate, empathic, sincere, likeable, understanding, supportive, caring, moral, tolerant, emotional* (German: *großzügig, hilfsbereit, gefühlsbetont, einfühlsam, herzlich, liebenswürdig, verständnisvoll, unterstützend, fürsorglich, moralisch, tolerant, emotional*).

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary Analyses

In order to test the consistency of our agency and communion traits we conducted two principal component factor analyses of the 24 ratings, one for the self-ratings and the other for the friend-ratings. Regarding both the self-ratings and the friend-ratings the scree plots clearly suggested two-factorial solutions in which factor 1 comprised the communion traits (27% of the item variance in case of the self-ratings; 25% of the item variance in case of the friend ratings). Factor 2 comprised the agency traits (21% of item variance for both the self ratings and the friend ratings). The reliabilities of the four scales were good (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s > .85). Our further analyses were conducted with the means of the agency and communion scales.

We first tested whether the different item orders had an influence. This was not the case, all  $F$ s < 1. We then tested whether the order of rating self vs. friend (self first vs. friend first) had an effect. This was also not the case, all  $F$ s < 1.07,  $p$  > .31. We therefore collapsed the data across the different order conditions.

We also tested whether participant gender had an influence on trait ascriptions. A two (gender: female, male) by two (target: self, friend) by two (content: agency, communion) factorial ANOVA with repeated measures on the last two factors revealed no gender main effect,  $F$  < 1, no interaction of gender by target,  $F$  < 1, but an interaction of gender and content,  $F(1, 72) = 7.09$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .090$ . Women generally rated communal traits higher

( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) than agentic traits ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = .45$ ),  $t(44) = 3.47$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .51$ , whereas men rated communion ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) and agency ( $M = 5.05$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) to a comparable degree,  $t < 1$ . There was, however, no three-way interaction of gender, content and target,  $F < 1$ , and we therefore did not consider gender in the further analyses.

### Hypotheses Testing

We tested our hypotheses by means of an ANOVA with target (self, friend) and content (agency, communion) as the repeated measures factors. There was no target effect,  $F < 1$ , but a significant content effect,  $F(1, 73) = 4.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .056$ , and a significant two-way interaction of content by target,  $F(1, 73) = 8.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .107$  (see Figure 3).

Participants' ratings of own agency ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) and communion ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) did not differ,  $t < 1$ , but they rated the friend's communion higher ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = .85$ ) than the friend's agency ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = .78$ ),  $t(73) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .43$ . Moreover, they rated their own agency higher than their friend's agency,  $t(73) = 1.83$ ,  $p = .07$  ( $p < .04$ , one-tailed),  $d = .43$ ; and they rated their own communion lower than their friend's communion,  $t(73) = 2.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .65$ .

### Discussion

Study 2 again supported Hypotheses (2) and (3). Participants rated their own agency higher than the friend's agency, and they rated their own communion lower than their friend's communion. Hypothesis (1) was supported for the friend, as the friend was rated higher on communion than on agency. Ratings on agency and communion did, however, not differ for the self.

### General Discussion

Across two studies with different modes of assessment (free responses, ratings) and different modes of control for valence (Study 1: content analysis, Study 2: pre-selection) we found support for our Hypothesis (2) that people ascribe more agency to themselves than to others. This is in accord with the DPM according to which "getting ahead" is a more important aim in the actor/self perspective than in the observer/other perspective causing actors to think of themselves in agentic terms to a higher extent than they think of others in agentic

terms. According to Hypothesis (3), people should ascribe more communion to others than to themselves. This hypothesis was also supported in both studies. It is the DPM assumption that “getting along” is more important in the observer perspective than in the actor perspective and that accordingly, people primarily think of others in communal rather than agentic terms.

According to Hypothesis (1) people assign both themselves and others more communal than agentic traits. This was supported in Study 1 and also supported for the friend in Study 2, but not for the self in Study 2. We think that Hypothesis (1) has, in fact, some validity, when free person descriptions are analyzed. However, these free descriptions with respect to communion or agency are differentially correlated with valence, as has been demonstrated in Study 1. Hence, it seems that people describe both others and themselves with more communal than agentic traits because – in addition to the general “primacy” of communion (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011) – self-selected communal traits are more positive than self-selected agentic traits. Conversely, when traits are pre-selected with regard to favorability (Study 2), people still ascribe others more communion than agency; however, they do not differentiate between both content classes for the self. Summarizing, in the light of the present findings we would refine Hypothesis (1) such that when valence is not controlled for, people assign both others and themselves more communion than agency. When valence is controlled for this effect only occurs for descriptions of others.<sup>2</sup>

To sum up, the present studies support to the DPM according to which more agency is ascribed to the self than to others and less – positive – communion (and more lack of communion) is ascribed to the self than to others. Without controlling for valence more communion is ascribed to both the self and others. The findings were similar across two different methodologies (free response formats; rating scales).

An important implication of this research concerns (mis-)understandings in social interaction and communication. If observers focus mostly on communion while actors focus on both agency and communion, actors should think that they are displaying/ communicating more agency than observers perceive. This could cause misunderstandings, for example

when one person (as actor) thinks that he or she has been asserting a standpoint in a discussion while the other person's dominant impression (as observer) could be that the actor was unfriendly. Likewise, one could imagine a situation in which one person (as observer) thinks that the other person has been very polite, while this person's own interpretation of the situation may be that he or she could not assert his or her standpoint adequately. An important question for future research is to what extent this is indeed the case in actual communicative encounters and how this knowledge can be used to improve communication (cf. Abele, et al., 2012).

### **Conclusions**

The present research showed that people ascribe traits to the self and others that reflect the primary objectives in the perspectives of actor and observer. These are "getting along" in general and "getting ahead" in case of actors. Valence is an important moderator, especially with respect to ascriptions of communion.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because there was some variation in the number of traits that participants listed, one might argue that we should base our analyses on the relative rather than the absolute number of agentic and communal traits. However, whether we use absolute or relative values does not change the main results or their level or statistical significance. We therefore decided to report absolute values.

<sup>2</sup> Another important difference between Studies 1 and 2 is that in Study 1, participants only had space to list a limited number of traits and so listing traits pertaining to one dimension automatically limits the number of traits pertaining to the other dimension. The ratings in Study 2 on the other hand were independent and participants could rate both dimensions equally high.

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**Figure captions**

*Figure 1:* Agency and communion descriptions of self and friend (Study 1).

*Figure 2:* Lack of Agency and Communion Descriptions of Self and Friend (Study 1).

*Figure 3:* Ratings of agentic and communal traits for self and friend (Study 2).

Figure 1

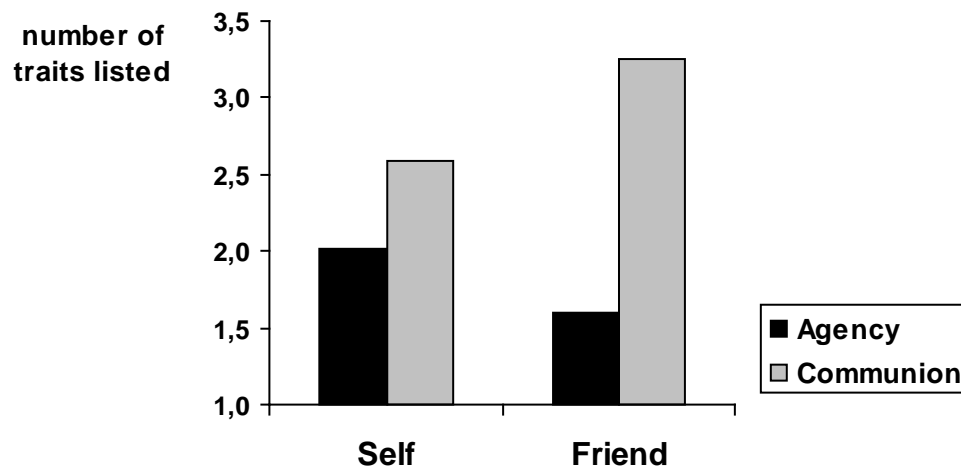
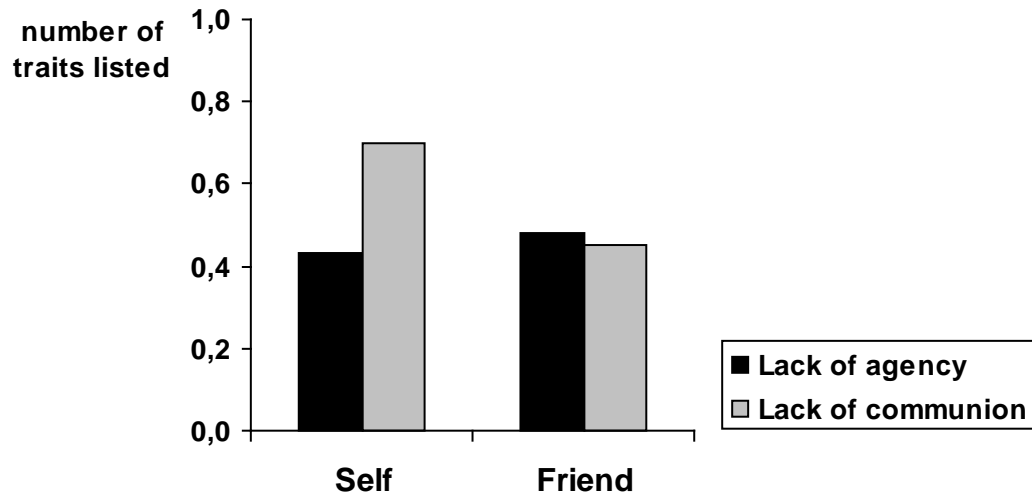


Figure 2





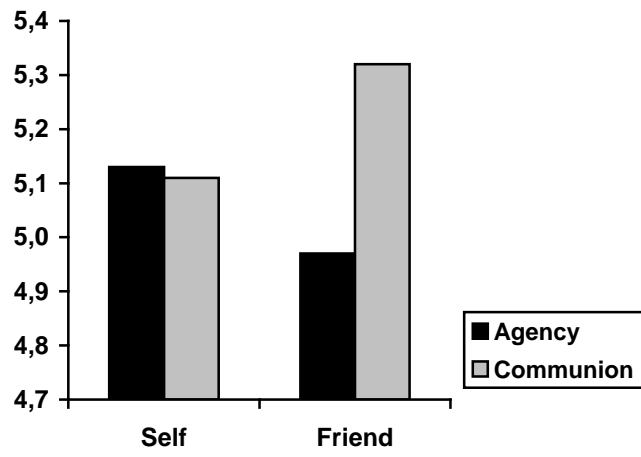


Figure 3