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Agency, Communion, and Gender as Predictors of Communication Style and Being Liked in Adult Male-Female Dyads¹

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Agency, communion, and gender were compared as predictors of communication style in the conversations of 76 unacquainted pairs of male-female college students. Each dyad was given a popular issue to discuss for 5 min. Agency and communion were measured using Spence and Helmreich's (Masculinity and Femininity: Their Psychological Dimensions, Correlates, and Antecedents, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1978) Personal Attributes Questionnaire. Self-perceived agency was significantly associated with verbal assertiveness: High-agency persons used fewer indirect statements and fewer passive self-references than low-agency persons. Nonsignificant trends indicated that self-perceived communion tended to be associated with interpersonal involvement: High-communion persons used fewer impersonal references and were liked more than low-communion persons.

Bakan (1966) described *agency* and *communion* as two dimensions of psychological functioning. Agency refers to self-assertion while communion

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refers to interpersonal involvement. Although traditional gender roles have emphasized agency for males and communion for females, Bakan viewed the integration of agency and communion as being most desirable. Similarly, more recent gender-role researchers have proposed "androgyny," the integration of masculinity and femininity, to describe the fully functioning personality (Bem, 1975; Block, 1973; Carlson, 1971; Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

The study of the androgynous, or integrated, personality has shifted the direction of gender research. Instead of studying *sex* differences, many gender researchers now examine *individual* differences. Once researchers began making a distinction between sex-typed, reverse-sex-typed, and androgynous individuals, comparisons along gender lines alone appeared misleading [see Lott (1981) for a further discussion of the implications of studying sex differences vs individual differences].

Communication style is one area where much research has revealed gender differences [see Haas (1979) for a review]. Women typically have been found to demonstrate a communal orientation by discussing topics concerned with people more than men; women's communion also has been revealed through the use of more supportive and expressive language forms. Conversely, men have been found to manifest an agentic orientation by discussing topics like their work or sports more than do women; men's agency also has been seen in their greater use of controlling and instrumental language forms.

Recent studies have indicated that these findings may be either confounded or complicated by individual differences in people's *gender-role self-concept* (e.g., Crosby, Jose, & Wong-McCarthy, 1981; Ickes, 1981; LaFrance & Carmen, 1980; Lamke & Bell, 1982). For example, whereas Haas (1979) reviewed several studies finding that men talked more than women during mixed-sex conversation, Crosby et al. (1981) found that a speaker's self-reported degree of agency—rather than his or her gender—predicted how much he or she talked in a mixed-sex setting. Thus, the earlier reports of greater male talkativeness may have been a function of the greater agency traditionally prescribed for the male role—especially in mixed-sex contexts [see Henley (1977, 1985) for further discussion of this point].

The present study sought to examine the extent to which differences in agentic and communal language behavior during mixed-sex conversation could be predicted by speakers' gender or their gender-role self-concept. Gender-role self-concept refers to the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as being agentic and communal. It was hypothesized that self-perceived agentic competence would predict self-assertive language use and that self-perceived communal competence would predict other-affirming language use—*independent of speaker gender*.

Four language forms were hypothesized to correlate with agency. Two of these had been previously tied to self-reports of agency. Two others were based on related research.

1. High-agency speakers were hypothesized to speak more in their turns than low-agency speakers. As previously mentioned, Crosby et al. (1981) found that self-reported agency predicted speakers' amount of talking.
2. High-agency speakers were hypothesized to use fewer indirect statements as qualifiers than low-agency speakers. Crosby and her associates also found that low-agency speakers used fewer indirect forms of speech.
3. High-agency speakers were expected to use more active self-references than low-agency speakers. Although no study has related this measure to gender self-concept, Bernardez-Bonesatti (1974) observed a positive relationship between the use of the pronoun *I* and conversational dominance.
4. High-agency speakers were expected to use fewer passive self-references than low-agency speakers. This variable also has not been studied by researchers in this area. However, Weintraub (1981) indicated that frequent use of the pronoun *me* was more common among women and among patients with psychiatric diagnoses involving passive behavior.

Two language forms were hypothesized to correlate with communion. Neither had been previously tied to this construct, although there was other research that suggested their connection.

5. High-communion speakers were hypothesized to use fewer impersonal references than low-communion speakers. Women have reported talking about intimate topics in conversations more than have men (e.g., Aries & Johnson, 1983; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982). Also, according to Weintraub (1981), frequent impersonal references in conversation signal an avoidance of intimacy.
6. High-communion speakers were hypothesized to make more references to their partners than low-communion speakers. As previously noted, Bernardez-Bonesatti (1974) reported a relationship between self-references and dominance. Conversely, it was reasoned that references to the other should reflect an affirmation of the other.

In addition to the above proposal regarding the conversational measures, gender-role self-concept was hypothesized to predict how much one would be liked:

7. Given their interpersonal orientation, high-communion persons were expected to facilitate the interactional process more than low-communion persons; this then would lead to greater interactional satisfaction for their partners. The greater communion traditionally associated with females may explain some reports that participants in mixed-sex settings indicate liking the women more than the men (e.g., Lott, Lott, Reed, & Crow, 1970; Touhey, 1972).

In summary, agency and communion are proposed as two dimensions of psychological functioning reflected in conversational behavior. Agency is hypothesized to be indicated by the following communication forms: more active self-references, fewer passive self-references, and fewer indirect statements. Communion is hypothesized to be indicated in the following ways: fewer impersonal references, more references to other, and more liking by partner.

These hypotheses were tested using Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Personal Attributes Questionnaire to measure competencies in agency and communion. A situation requiring deliberation over a popular issue between unacquainted pairs of male-female college students was used. This task was chosen because both agency (e.g., asserting one's own opinion) and communion (e.g., seeking an understanding of the other's viewpoint) would be appropriate. A mixed-sex setting was chosen, based on previous reports that gender differences in communication style often are manifested in this context but not in same-sex ones (e.g., Aries, 1982; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977).

METHOD

Participants

Seventy-six male and 76 female undergraduates from introductory psychology classes participated in the study.

Materials

Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). The PAQ has a masculinity scale and a femininity scale, which Spence and Helmreich (1978) describe as measurements of agency and communion, respectively (see p. 33). The masculinity scale asks for self-ratings of independence, activity, com-

petitiveness, decisiveness, persistence, confidence, superiority, and ability to withstand pressure. The femininity scale asks for self-ratings of emotionality, devotion to others, gentleness, helpfulness, kindness, awareness of others' feelings, understanding of others, and warmth.

Issues and Opinions Questionnaire (IOQ). The IOQ was designed for this study to assess the participants' opinions on various issues believed to interest college students. The issues concerned federal budget cuts, funding for university cultural events, law school admissions criteria, making friends as a new student, dealing with a problem child, teenage pregnancy, making impressions on a first date, deciding on a major, competitive enrollment in a popular class, and the components of successful love relationships. For example, this last issue read as follows:

What do you believe is the most important component in a good love relationship?
(Rank the following in order of importance for you.)

- Personal freedoms
- Trust
- Sexual satisfaction
- Ability to talk openly
- Common interests

How strong is your opinion on this issue?

High Medium Low

As the above example indicates, the options for each issue were rank ordered by the respondent. Furthermore, each issue was rated for the degree to which the respondent had a strong opinion on the issue.

Interpersonal Judgment Scale (IJS). The IJS (Byrne, 1971) is made up of two 7-point scales. The first asks how much the respondent liked working with the partner and the second asks how much he or she would like working with the partner in another experiment. The scores on the two scales were combined to form a measure of interactional satisfaction.

Procedure

First Session. Participants attended two research sessions. During the first session, they responded to the PAQ and the IOQ in a classroom with other volunteers. The second session followed approximately 1-3 weeks later. All sessions were administered by either a male or a female undergraduate research assistant.

Matching. Prior to the second session, students were matched into male-female pairs based on the following criteria:

1. The partners were unacquainted with one another.
2. Eight dyad types were created based on the individual's PAQ scores. Depending on whether they fell above or below the median on the masculine scale and the feminine scale, each person was identified as being high or low

in agency and communion, respectively. The medians were 21 for the masculine scale and 23 for the feminine scale, which coincide with those reported by Spence and Helmreich (1978).

The participants were further categorized as being high in both agency and communion ("androgynous"), high in agency and low in communion ("masculine"), low in agency and high in communion ("feminine"), or low in both ("undifferentiated").

The following matches were made: androgynous-androgynous, undifferentiated-undifferentiated, androgynous-undifferentiated, masculine-masculine, feminine-feminine, and masculine-feminine. These dyad categories were balanced for gender as well.³

3. An issue from the IOQ was selected on which the dyad members held different opinions.

4. Only issues on which both partners were opinionated to the same degree were used. However, issues rated with "low" opinion strength were not used.

Once these matches were made, the dyad members were individually contacted by telephone and an appointment was arranged for the second session.

Second Session. When both members of the matched dyad arrived for the second session, they were seated together in a small windowless room with an operating cassette tape recorder. No introductions were made. The research assistant stated, "I'll be back in a couple of minutes with the materials."

Three minutes were timed and the researcher came back and provided each person with a copy of the same issue. The research assistant asked the participants to discuss the issue and pick one out of the five options together. They were told that they had 5 min to do this.

After the 5 min had elapsed, the research assistant returned and asked them which option they had selected. Then the two students were separated and given the IJS to fill out. Afterwards, they were thanked for their participation.

³The terms *androgynous*, *masculine*, *feminine*, and *undifferentiated* have been used by gender-role researchers (e.g., Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Although they allow us to consider how both sexes may be "masculine" and "feminine" simultaneously, these terms have been criticized (e.g., Lott, 1981) because they still suggest some behaviors as being more malelike ("masculine") and others as being more femalelike ("feminine"). They are mentioned in the text as a convenience for those readers familiar with them. However, the terms *agency* and *communion* are used here instead of *masculinity* and *femininity*, respectively, to describe behavior in the rest of the paper.

Analysis

The tape recordings of the conversation were transcribed. Only the 5-min discussion segment of the conversations was used in the analysis. Furthermore, in order to ensure that the analysis of communication style was based on the same context for all dyads, parts of conversations unrelated to the deliberation of the issue were not coded.

The transcripts were coded for the following variables:

Impersonal References. The number of subject nouns that did not refer to persons conceivably known to either speaker were counted in this category.

Indirect Statements. The number of sentences beginning with the qualifying clause *I think* was counted here.

Active Self-References. The use of the personal pronoun *I* was tallied in this category.

Passive Self-References. The use of the pronoun *me* was counted here.

References to Other. The use of the pronoun *you* was counted, but its use in the parenthetical phrase *you know* was excluded in this category.

Talkativeness. This measure was determined by averaging the number of words spoken in a turn.

For all of the above measures except talkativeness, the category total was adjusted by being divided by the total number of words and then multiplied by 1000.

RESULTS

Agency and Communal Communication

Multivariate Analysis of Variance. In order to test the overall ability of agency and communion to predict conversational behavior, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed. Participants were classified as being either low or high in agency and communion based on whether their PAQ scores fell below or above the sample median for the masculinity and femininity scales, respectively. This yielded a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design for the following variables: gender (male, female), agency (low, high), and communion (low, high). Gender was included in the analysis in order to test the general hypothesis that language behavior is better predicted from personality variables like agency and communion than from gender alone.⁴

⁴Differences associated with the four gender-role categories—*androgynous* (high agency and high communion), *feminine* (low agency and high communion), *masculine* (high agency and low communion), and *undifferentiated* (low agency and low communion)—were tested in the Agency \times Communion interaction. Furthermore, any differences between sex-typed vs reverse-sex-typed persons were tested in the Gender \times Agency \times Communion interaction.

The MANOVA indicated two multivariate effects. First, a significant amount of the variance for the six language variables was explained by agency [$F(1, 141) = 2.42, p < .05$].

Significant main effects for agency were indicated in the univariate tests as well. Agency was a significant predictor of indirect statements [$F(1, 141) = 4.04, p < .05$]. As predicted, high-agency persons had lower indirect statement scores ($M = 128.9$) than did low-agency persons ($M = 170.4$).

Agency was also a predictor of references to other [$F(1, 141) = 4.12, p < .05$]. High-agency persons had lower scores for references to other ($M = 8.8$) than did low-agency persons ($M = 15.2$).

Second, a Gender \times Communion interaction was indicated in the MANOVA [$F(1, 141) = 2.17, p < .05$].

The univariate tests revealed a significant Gender \times Communion interaction associated with active self-references [$F(1, 141) = 7.56, p < .01$]. High-communion men had lower scores for these references ($M = 41.9$) than did low-communion men ($M = 57.0$). However, this was not true for women; there was little difference between the high-communion women ($M = 48.6$) and the low-communion women ($M = 44.4$) in their active self-reference scores.

Significant main effects for communion or gender were not found in the MANOVA.

Multiple Regression. Stepwise multiple regressions were performed in order to explore whether or not agency and communion were more powerful predictors of language behavior than gender. Agency and communion scores were once again derived from the PAQ masculinity and femininity scores, respectively. However, in this analysis the raw scores from the two scales were used as measured variables. Gender was indicated as a dummy variable in the analysis.

As expected, gender did not predict a significant amount of the variance for any of the language variables. Agency and communion, on the other hand, were good predictors of language behavior.

Agency predicted a significant amount of variance in the participants' use of indirect statements [$R^2 = .04, F(1, 152) = 5.79, p < .02$]. As expected, there was a negative correlation between the two variables [$r = -.19, p < .05$].

Agency also significantly predicted passive self-references [$R^2 = .03, F(1, 152) = 5.29, p < .03$]. The expected negative correlation between these variables was confirmed [$r = -.18, p < .05$].

Communion predicted a significant amount of variance in talkativeness [$R^2 = .04, F(1, 152) = 6.79, p < .02$]. There was also a positive correlation between these variables [$r = .21, p < .02$].

Communion did not predict a significant amount of variance in the use of impersonal references, contrary to expectation. However, the anticipated

negative correlation between the variables did approach statistical significance [$r = -.14, p < .10$].

Active self-references and references to other were not explained by any of the predictor variables in the multiple regression analysis.

Interactional Satisfaction

The relationship between gender, agency, and communion, and being liked was examined. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) did not indicate any main effects or interactions for being liked. However, a small positive correlation approaching significance between being liked and PAQ femininity scores was found [$r = .13, p < .06$]. Thus, those indicating high communion on the PAQ were liked by their partners more than those indicating low communion.

DISCUSSION

The results provide direct support for two of the seven specific hypotheses. First, as expected, high-agency persons used the indirect statement *I think* significantly less than low-agency persons. This observation further confirms Crosby et al.'s (1981) finding that qualifiers and other indirect forms of speech were negatively related to self-reports of agency. However, both sets of results contradict Hirschman (1974), who characterized the qualifier *I think* as a form of assertiveness. Perhaps this discrepancy results from Hirschman's small sample size of only two males and two females, or from different conversational contexts. Given the extent to which Hirschman's study has been cited (e.g., Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Haas, 1979; Kramarae, Thorne, & Henley, 1983; Phillips, 1980; Smith, 1979; Thorne & Henley, 1975), the difference between these findings deserves attention.

The other favorable finding was the observed negative relationship between agency and the use of passive self-references. As hypothesized, high-agency speakers used the pronoun *me* significantly less than low-agency speakers. This lends support to Weintraub's (1981) contention that using this pronoun reflects passivity and dependency. These characteristics are incompatible with high agency. In fact, one item on the PAQ masculinity scale contrasts being active vs being passive.

Besides the above two accepted hypotheses, there were others that received some tentative support for nonsignificant trends. For one of these, self-perceived communion and impersonal references were found to have a weak negative correlation. The assignment of topic likely influenced the speakers' use of impersonal references and perhaps also may have attenuated the association here.

There was also some support for the hypothesized positive relationship between communion and being liked. A weak correlation was indicated. Given that the observed connection between self-perceived communion and later reports of being liked presumably would be linked by actual communal behaviors during the intervening interaction, it is not surprising that the correlation is weak. A number of variables come into play here. Thus, it would seem that previous reports that women were liked more than men (Lott et al., 1970; Touhey, 1972) may have been confounded by the women's stronger communion.

Three hypotheses failed to receive confirmation: First, contrary to expectation, high-agency persons did not talk more in their conversational turns than low-agency persons. In fact, the results indicated that talkativeness was positively correlated with communion. This result contradicts Crosby et al. (1981), who found that agency predicted the amount of talking. However, it is compatible with Ickes's (1981) observation that more verbalizations were produced in dyads composed of at least one androgynous partner than in dyads where both members reflected traditional gender-role orientations. Thus, Ickes found greater talking when one partner was high in communion as well as in agency.

Perhaps, then, one's amount of talking can have different social meanings. Ickes characterized the amount of talking as a sign of interpersonal involvement. In this regard, contrast a silent, withdrawn person with a vocal, animated person. The more vocal person in this case would be more involved and, hence, more communal. On the other hand, there are people who control social interactions by doing most of the talking and making it difficult for others to contribute.

It seems that different kinds of measures are needed to account for these functional nuances. Perhaps the communal aspect of talkativeness could be assessed by distinguishing between those speakers whose average words per turn are either below or above the median for the sample. Those below the median may be indicating less interpersonal involvement than those above the median. Additionally, in order to assess the agentic aspect of talkativeness, the average words per turn for each speaker could be compared as ratios. For example, if Partner A speaks twice as many words per turn than Partner B, it may reflect Partner A's dominance over Partner B. (This approach, however, may not be sensitive to encounters between two persons who are high in both agency and communion.)

The second hypothesis that was not supported was that high-agency persons would use more active self-references in the form of the pronoun *I* than low-agency persons. No relationship between self-perceived agency and the use of active self-references was found. It now would seem that the pronoun *I* can have varied social meanings. For example, in "I want to pick this answer" active self-reference is part of an assertive statement. However,

in "I'll go along with your idea" active self-reference is embedded in a compliant statement. To add further complications to the interpretation of this form of self-reference, Weintraub (1981) has proposed that moderate use of *I* reflects individuation and assertion, whereas excessive use of *I* indicates self-preoccupation and infrequent use indicates detachment.

The last hypothesis that was not confirmed was the expectation that high-communion persons would use more references to the other in the form of the pronoun *you* than low-communion persons. This relationship was not indicated. In contrast, however, self-perceived agency was found to predict the use of references to the other. High-agency persons used the pronoun *you* less than low-agency persons. This finding is compatible with the underlying theory here, though. If a person is high in agency—especially when it is unmitigated with communion—then few references to the other person may reflect a self-oriented approach to the interaction. This interpretation requires testing in future research.⁵

In addition to the seven specific hypotheses that have been discussed, there was one overall hypothesis underlying the research: In general, gender-role self-concept—as indicated by self-perceived competencies in agency and communion—was hypothesized to be a better predictor of communication style than gender alone. This hypothesis was supported to the extent that no main effect for gender was indicated in any of the analyses. In contrast, a significant multivariate effect and significant univariate effects were found for agency. Therefore, there is support for the idea that previously reported gender differences in communication style [see Haas (1979) for a review] may be confounded or complicated by differences in gender-role self-concept.

However, although gender was not indicated as a main effect, there was a Gender \times Communion interaction with one variable: high-communion men used fewer active self-references than low-communion men, while there was little difference here between high- and low-communion women. One can only conjecture about the meaning of this interaction. Perhaps the high-communion men were trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Although the meaning of this finding is unclear, there is an important implication that follows: The Gender \times Communion interaction indicates that gender, even in conjunction with personality variables, still is an important predictor of behavior. Furthermore, it suggests that the variables examined—agency, communion, and the various language forms—may have different meanings for the sexes. For example, self-references seem to mean different things for low-communion men and women.

⁵It should be noted that a difference between high agency/high-communion ("androgynous") persons and high-agency/low-communion ("masculine") persons was not indicated in an Agency \times Communion interaction here. (Also note that no other Agency \times Communion interactions were indicated in the analyses.)

In closing, the present study lends support to previous recommendations that researchers move from the study of gender differences *alone* and instead investigate individual differences (e.g., Lott, 1981). The results reported here suggest that people's gender-role self-concept (i.e., their self-perceived competencies in agency and communion) in conjunction with gender can be effective predictors of their conversational behavior. Given the global measures of agency and communion used—Spence and Helmreich's (1978) masculinity and femininity scales—it is noteworthy to find the small yet significant correlations reported here. As our methods of personality assessment and language analysis improve, the relationship between gender, personality, and communication style will become clearer.

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