

AGENCY AND COMMUNION IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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AGENCY AND COMMUNION

Their implications for gender stereotypes and gender identities

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Agency and communion represent the two fundamental modalities of human nature. These dimensions, the so-called *Big Two*, represent self- versus other-orientation. As stated by Abele and Wojciszke (2014, p. 196), “Agentic content refers to goal-achievement and task functioning (competence, assertiveness, decisiveness), whereas communal content refers to the maintenance of relationships and social functioning (benevolence, trustworthiness, morality).” These dimensions constitute meta-concepts of human values, motives, traits, and behaviors. As we explain in this chapter, agency and communion are essential to the analysis of gender stereotypes and identities and their consequences.

Gender stereotypes: descriptive and prescriptive

Gender stereotypes are broadly defined as people’s consensual beliefs about the attributes of women and men. These stereotypes are culturally shared beliefs and can be *descriptive*, pertaining to the characteristics of women and men, and *prescriptive*, pertaining to the characteristics that women and men should or should not have (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). These stereotypes take the form of cognitive schemas, or sets of beliefs about each sex.

To assess gender stereotypes, researchers often have asked participants to rate a typical woman or man, or women and men in general, on a variety of traits, including agentic (e.g., ambitious, assertive) and communal (e.g., caring, sensitive) attributes. Although these direct, or explicit, measures are common, implicit measures have produced similar findings (e.g., Rudman & Goodwin, 2004).

Results of such studies have shown that women are perceived as more communal and less agentic than men (Williams & Best, 1982). Men are and should be assertive and competitive but not weak, whereas women are and should be socially sensitive and compassionate but not dominant. Although these gender stereotypes

are present in most cultures, an exception is the greater communion ascribed to men in some East Asian cultures (Cuddy et al., 2015; Steinmetz, Bosak, Sczesny, & Eagly, 2014). Also, as generally less salient themes, gender stereotypes include beliefs about the cognitive abilities, role behaviors, occupations, and physical attributes of men and women (e.g., Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000).

Another aspect of gender stereotypes is their relation to the societal status of men and women. Specifically, agentic traits associated with men are linked with high status, and communal traits associated with women are linked with low status (e.g., Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996;). Finally, although the lower societal status of women might suggest that the female stereotype is more negative than the male stereotype, the female stereotype is the more evaluatively positive stereotype, mainly due to the very positive value placed on communal qualities such as kindness and consideration (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994).

Sources of gender stereotypes

In general, gender stereotypes arise from life experiences in a given cultural context. Because the sorting of women and men into different social roles produces differences in their everyday behaviors, role behavior is a key source of what people observe and thus represent in their beliefs about the sexes. Consistent with the correspondent inference principle (Gilbert & Malone, 1995), people infer the traits of men and women from observations of their behavior and generally do so spontaneously. Because most behaviors are performed to enact social roles, the distribution of women and men into roles underlies gender stereotypes. For example, observations of mainly women caring for children contribute to the beliefs that women are compassionate and kind.

The specific activities that comprise a division of labor derive in part from male and female biology – that is, their evolved physical attributes, especially women's reproductive activities and men's size and strength, which can allow some activities to be more efficiently performed by one sex or the other, depending on the socioeconomic and ecological context. Human biology thus interacts with the environment to produce a division of labor. Within societies, the division of labor is perpetuated and legitimized through the formation of gender stereotypes that make the contemporaneous division of labor seem natural and inevitable.

Although preindustrial societies offered various divisions of labor, a male breadwinner and female homemaker arrangement emerged along with industrialization and urbanization in Europe and North America (Janssens, 1997). In contemporary industrialized and postindustrial societies, given low birthrates and shortened or optional lactation, women's reproductive activities are a much weaker constraint on their activities. Therefore, both women and men typically engage in paid labor. However, in an arrangement that might be called a *neotraditional division of labor*, men generally have longer employment hours, and women continue to spend more time than men on unpaid domestic work (Cohn, 2017). Also, despite a decrease over time in the sex segregation of occupations in many industrialized nations (e.g.,

Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2014), men still dominate most blue-collar jobs, many of which have strength-intensive components. Yet, men's greater size and strength are much less influential overall because most occupations now favor brains over brawn, and technology lessens the strength demands of most kinds of physical work.

Despite these changes, occupations have remained profoundly sex-segregated. Women are overrepresented in occupations that especially reward social skills (e.g., nursing, teaching children) and underrepresented in things-oriented occupations (most STEM fields and mechanical and construction trades; Lippa et al., 2014). The proportion of women is also low in occupations that especially reward agency (e.g., top leadership roles; European Commission, 2017). Sociologists thus refer to *horizontal gender segregation*, by which women and men have occupations favoring different traits and abilities, and *vertical segregation*, by which men are concentrated in occupations that yield greater status and power (Levanon & Grusky, 2016).

Social role theory proposes that everyday observations of the differing roles of women and men provide information from which people derive gender stereotypes (Eagly, 1987; Wood & Eagly, 2012). The resulting beliefs that women and men differ in agency and communion reflect *essentialism*, or the tendency to infer that different human essences underlie differences in behavior (Prentice & Miller, 2006). People may assume that such essences follow from social or biological causes (Rangel & Keller, 2011). These stereotypic beliefs have considerable accuracy at group level, that is, pertaining to women and men in general, due to their grounding in observations of group members' behaviors in their typical social roles (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). In this sense, stereotypes reflect social reality (Jussim, 2012). However, they are of course not accurate for individuals who are atypical of their sex.

The perception of both sexes is influenced by their memberships in social groups in addition to gender (*intersectionality*; Shields, 2008). Hence, studying gender along with groupings by sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and social class reflects the complexity of people's lives. Intersectional stereotypes can contain distinct elements beyond gender stereotypes. For instance, gender stereotypes are closest to those of Whites, whereas stereotypes about Black women are somewhat different from stereotypes about women in general and Blacks in general (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013).

Gender stereotypes continue to receive support from contemporary occupational and domestic role segregation (Levanon & Grusky, 2016). Thus, a comparison of gender-stereotypical beliefs in the United States at earlier and recent time points has revealed approximately the same agentic and communal beliefs (e.g., Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016). However, studies have failed to identify women's gain in stereotypical competence, which presumably has occurred because of their shift to paid employment and their greatly increased higher education. For example, US survey research by the Pew Research Center (2015) found that respondents believed that women were higher than men on competence traits such as organized, innovative, and intelligent, yet lower on agentic traits such as ambitious and decisive. Also, research on so-called *dynamic stereotypes* has shown a narrative of change whereby people believe that women have become and are continuing

to become more agentic, whereas men are more constant in their attributes (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). In reality, women appear to have gained stereotypical competence but much less agency given their slow rise into roles demanding qualities such as dominance and competitiveness.

Consequences of gender stereotypes for occupants of agentic and communal roles

Over the last decades, researchers have made substantial advances in understanding the consequences of gender stereotypes for women in agentially demanding roles, especially in leadership roles. According to the *lack of fit model* (Heilman, 1983, 2012) and the *role congruity theory* of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002), leadership roles are thought to require mainly agentic qualities. Stereotypes of leaders and managers are thus more similar to the characterization of men than women and portray leaders as higher in agentic than communal traits (see meta-analysis by Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Women thus suffer from a mismatch between the leader role and their female gender role.

Expectations triggered by this perceived mismatch can have far-reaching consequences for women in leadership contexts. Their overriding challenge is to reconcile the leader role's demand for agency and the female role's demand for communion, creating a *double bind*. One consequence is that, as many experiments have demonstrated, women are censured for violating the proscription against women engaging in clearly dominant behavior (see meta-analysis by Williams & Tiedens, 2016), even though such behavior is generally appropriate to leader roles. In general, women who occupy leadership positions are seen as less legitimate than their male counterparts, triggering consequences such as challenges to their authority and reduced cooperation (see review by Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016).

As a result of these conflicting demands, female leaders can face a *double standard*, such that for comparable levels of performance, they are evaluated less favorably than male leaders, especially in male-dominated settings (see meta-analysis by Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). For example, in studies of managers (Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995), men received higher evaluations than women who performed equally well. Except in feminine settings, women generally must display greater evidence of skill than men to be considered equally competent (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). Also, as candidates for male-dominated jobs, women were less likely to receive positive evaluations than equivalent men when evaluated by men (see meta-analysis by Koch, D'Mello, & Sackett, 2015).

The situation of men in female-dominated communal roles has received less attention (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015). One disadvantage that such men experience is a lack of same-sex role models, a deficit that women also experience in male-dominated roles. In addition, the incongruity and lack of fit theories outlined above could be extended to consider the mismatch between the

male stereotype and communal demands of female-typed occupations. Men are often penalized when they enact communal behavior or are successful in feminine domains and thereby violate male gender norms (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012).

Men's occupancy of caring roles in the home and workplace can produce double standards and double binds that mirror those that women experience in male-dominated roles. For instance, men who were successful as employee relations counselors (a female-dominated position) were perceived as less effective and were granted less respect than successful women in the same job (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). Also, an experiment found that male applicants for an elementary teaching position were perceived as more likely to be gay and less likeable (but not less hireable) than female applicants with similar qualifications (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016). In fact, men working in childcare can be viewed as a safety threat because some believe that they might abuse children physically or sexually (Nentwich, Poppen, Schälin, & Vogt, 2013).

Despite these and other studies suggesting male disadvantage in female-dominated jobs, recent experimental evidence suggests that men may sometimes be favored over women for such positions, although more by female than male evaluators (see meta-analysis by Koch et al., 2015). Perhaps such data reflect a concern, especially on the part of women, for integrating jobs in the female ghetto.

Other evidence also suggests that, contrary to the double standard, persons from the underrepresented sex are sometimes affirmatively hired over equally qualified persons from the overrepresented sex. For instance, in a field experiment, excellent fictitious female applicants for tenure-track assistant professorships in STEM disciplines were preferred with a ratio of 2:1 over equally qualified male applicants by faculty members at numerous US universities (Williams & Ceci, 2015). Moreover, data from actual hiring at 89 US research-intensive institutions showed that in the sciences in general, women who applied for academic positions had a better chance of being interviewed and receiving offers than did male job candidates (National Research Council, 2010). Furthermore, an organization's commitment to diversity goals can favor those women who appear to have the abilities necessary for reaching the upper echelons of organizations. Such women received higher pay than high-potential men (in field studies and experiments; Leslie, Manchester, & Dahm, 2017). In addition, male vanguards in female-typed professions can profit from structural advantages that tend to promote them into leadership positions (*the glass escalator*; Williams, 2013).

Intersectional stereotypes based on memberships in multiple groups can have complex implications in differing contexts, as revealed in experiments varying such attributes. For instance, Black female leaders were evaluated more negatively for organizational failure than White women and Black and White men (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). However, Black female leaders behaving dominantly did not suffer from the same agency penalty that White female leaders experienced, probably because Black women's stereotype typically includes agentic attributes (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012).

Gender identity

Gender identity is individuals' self-definition as female or male, which is based on their biological sex as interpreted within their culture (Wood & Eagly, 2015). When people describe who they are, most indicate that being a man or woman or boy or girl is important to their identity and ascribe at least some gender-stereotypical traits to themselves.

The most basic aspect of gender identity is an existential sense of oneself as female or male, which ordinarily corresponds to one's biological sex. Psychologists have invented various direct and indirect methods for assessing this basic or existential categorization of oneself as male or female. The most popular measure adapts Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) collective self-esteem scale with items such as "Being a woman [man] is an important reflection of who I am."

At an early age, children typically learn that there are two sexes and that they belong to one of these groupings (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Awareness of self and others as male or female, which emerges by around 18 months of age, further develops as children learn what this classification means in their culture. Observations of other boys and girls motivate children to act similarly by, for example, playing with gender-typical toys.

As children mature, their personal experiences and observations of others shape their ideas about the sexes into gender stereotypes, which form one basis for their identities as they incorporate the cultural meanings of gender into their own psyches. To the extent that people value their female or male group membership, they tend to self-stereotype by ascribing culturally feminine or masculine attributes to themselves. The link between self-categorization in a social group and the application of the group stereotype to oneself is a key principle of social identity theory (Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 1990). For example, among those who value belonging to their male or female social category, women may regard themselves as caring and compassionate and men regarded themselves as strong and competitive.

To assess this self-stereotyping aspect of gender identity, psychologists typically obtain self-reports from women and men of their agentic and communal personality traits by having them respond on rating scales (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1980). These dimensions of personality thus match gender stereotypes, and, in fact, were derived from earlier research demonstrating these stereotypes (Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968). Implicit measures have also been adapted to assess this trait aspect of gender identity (e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000).

People act on their gender identities through self-regulatory processes, by which they control their behavior to conform to their identity (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997). Persons who value their identity as a woman or a man experience positive affect when acting consistently with their personal gender standards and negative affect when acting in ways that depart from these standards. These emotions then guide their future actions.

People incorporate more complex forms of gender into intersectional identities (Remedios & Snyder, 2015). In addition, not everyone is strongly gender-identified, and instead some people completely reject gender distinctions (*genderqueer*). Furthermore, even though gender identity usually matches biological sex (*cisgender*), variations exist, with some people transitioning to the other sex (*transgender*) and sometimes modifying their biological sexual characteristics (*transsexual*). Other people resist internalizing aspects of their gender's stereotype, as some women may embrace high, not low, agency.

Gender identity related to behavior

Gender identity works together with stereotyping to influence behavior. To the extent that women ascribe low agency to themselves or are aware of the stereotype that women lack agency, they can engage in self-limiting behavior such as making less ambitious career choices (Heilman, 2012). Mere awareness of others' stereotype-based expectations can produce stereotype threat that impairs their performance (see review by Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Many studies have shown that individuals whose identities are threatened in a particular evaluative context can suffer from impaired performance. Being especially identified with one's gender increases vulnerability to such performance effects because the pertinent stereotype is personally relevant (e.g., Schmader, 2002).

Women can experience stereotype threat when attempting leadership. In an experimental demonstration, students viewed television commercials featuring female-stereotypic (vs. neutral) content (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Women, but not men, exposed to the female-stereotypic portrayals subsequently expressed less preference for a leadership role than a no-leadership role. Chronic threats of this type can have profound implications for women's identities in male-dominated contexts (Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2004). In such situations, women may engage in *identity bifurcation*, by which they prioritize their identity in the domain being evaluated (e.g., leadership, mathematics) and reject aspects of typical feminine identity that could threaten their domain competence (e.g., planning to have children). This reaction seems to be a high price to pay for maintaining a sense of domain competence. Also, female leaders' worry that others think that women have trouble exerting authority can cause them to falter, lose confidence, and even to withdraw (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

Experimental research has related gender identities to various outcomes. Women perceived themselves as less suitable for an advertised leadership position than men, but the candidates' agentic gender identity related more strongly to their self-ascribed fit with the leadership position than their sex (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). Furthermore, women working in collaboration with men were unwilling to take an equal amount of credit for successful joint outcomes (Haynes & Heilman, 2013), presumably because of their less self-assertive identities as well as others' beliefs that women should be modest.

Gender stereotypes and gender identities can complicate men's performances as well. Stereotype threat can undermine men in communal roles, given, for example, the stereotype that men are deficient in social skills. In an experiment in which male participants learned that a test measured social sensitivity and that women generally scored better on this test, these men performed worse than men who had not been alerted to this female-favoring stereotype (Koenig & Eagly, 2005). Women, in contrast, were less affected by this information, performing non-significantly better when exposed to the female superiority message. In fact, men may be especially vulnerable to threat in such situations according to the argument that male gender identity, or *manhood*, is a precarious social status that is difficult to achieve and needs to be confirmed through visible actions (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Therefore, as experiments have shown, men may be more anxious than women to guard and confirm their gender identity, motivating agentic behaviors and restraining communal behaviors. The enhancement of agentic behavior occurred when threats to men's masculinity increased their aggression (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Arzu Wasti, 2009) and the harassment of women (Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003). Specifically, threats to men's masculinity increased their aggression and harassing behavior toward women. Threatening men by informing them that they had low (vs. high) testosterone caused them to express more traditional attitudes toward parenting and less support for gender equality and collective egalitarian action (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016).

Other research has tested predictions about gender identity in natural settings. In general, agentic identity predicted self-assertive outcomes such as career success (e.g., Abele, 2003; Evers & Sieverding, 2014). Communal identity predicted relational outcomes such as involvement in family roles (e.g., Abele, 2003) and satisfaction in close relationships (e.g., Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). In longitudinal research, such outcomes manifested even 10 years after the initial assessment of gender identity (Abele & Spurk, 2011).

Despite societal changes in recent years, apparently the communal and agentic gender identities of women and men have converged only a small amount between 1974 and 2012, mainly by women viewing themselves as slightly more agentic than in earlier years (see meta-analysis by Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). An initial tendency for women's agency to increase sharply during this period then faded, to produce only a small increase overall. Given little overall change in men's agency or men's or women's communion, sex differences in agentic and communal gender identities have remained substantial: $d = 0.72$ for greater communion in women and $d = 0.55$ for greater agency in men. This phenomenon should not be surprising, given the persistence of agentic and communal stereotypes that we noted earlier and the striking segregation of occupational and domestic roles that continues to fuel these stereotypes. Such findings suggest that gender, understood in terms of agency and communion, has so far not yielded much in response to changes in women's roles or to the ongoing challenges to the gender binary.

Conclusion

The Big Two – agency and communion – are overriding themes in psychological gender research. Social scientists, especially psychologists, have widely adopted these concepts to describe gender stereotypes and gender identity and their consequences for behavior. Reflecting psychologists' idea that masculine stereotypes have served largely as negative forces slowing women's attainment of gender equality, it seemed that change in women's roles would boost their agency. Indeed, women more often complete higher education, have taken up paid work and entered many higher status occupational roles. What many scholars of gender have missed is the preservation of the agency-communion divide in social roles, despite these changes. Women remain concentrated primarily in communally demanding occupations. In addition, women's entry into agentially demanding occupations such as management and law has triggered internal resegregation. Women are underrepresented in the subareas of these professions regarded as more agentially demanding (e.g., top leadership roles in corporations and government) and overrepresented in the subareas regarded as more communally demanding (e.g., human resources management; Levanon & Grusky, 2016). In addition, men have shown little movement into female-dominated roles, either in the workplace or in families (Croft et al., 2015). This neotraditional division of labor perpetuates gender-stereotypical beliefs about agency and communion as well as matching sex differences in gender identity.

Understanding of these phenomena could be furthered by information from a broader range of cultures. Although some researchers have incorporated data from many nations (e.g., Williams & Best, 1982), the majority of studies come mainly from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic cultures (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), with the United States being decidedly overrepresented.

As another limitation, theoretical and empirical work on agency and communion has often been restricted to a binary view that neglects the intersections of gender with other group memberships. Also neglected are increasing trends toward gender and sexual fluidity. Future research should expand these themes to enlarge the understanding of gender in its varied, contemporary manifestations.

Another emerging theme is that the Big Two sometimes decompose into three or four components. For example, agency sometimes has two components, *assertiveness* and *competence*, and communion also can have two components, *warmth/sociability* and *morality* (see Abele et al., 2016). The assertiveness/competence differentiation is important to gender stereotypes because, as we have suggested, contemporary stereotypes portray women as less assertive than men but not necessarily less competent.

In conclusion, psychologists have made remarkable progress in understanding the phenomena of gender. Nevertheless, in addition to remedying deficits we noted in cultural breadth, intersectionality, and subcomponents of agency and communion, psychologists of gender should reach beyond disciplinary boundaries to take into account the important research conducted by sociologists and

economists as well as by neuroscientists and other biologically-oriented researchers. Current knowledge, enhanced by the new directions that we recommend, should favor the development of policies and interventions that advance equal opportunities for women and men.

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