

Agency and Communion as Motivators for Moral Disengagement

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Agency and communion were defined in 1966 as broad organizing dimensions of personality comprising “the duality of human existence” (Bakan, 1966). Agency generally reflects a self-focus, satisfied by separation, independence, dominance, and achievement (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000). On the other hand, communion reflects a focus on others, satisfied by connection, interpersonal relatedness, and caring (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000). Although these traits are often portrayed as being in tension with one another, a healthy individual should have aspects of both agency and communion in his personality, achieving a comfortable balance between the two. Since agency is related only to self-relevant outcomes, it must be supplemented, or mitigated, by communion to satisfy both the self’s own needs and the self’s needs in relation to others (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000). Healthy levels of agency and communion have been shown to motivate social behavior and goals, and are associated with positive outcomes in health and well-being (Hegelson, 1994). Agency is related to reduced depression and anxiety (Holahan & Spence, 1980) and enhanced self-esteem (Carlson & Baxter, 1984). Communion has been related to positive relationship outcomes like social self-esteem (Hawkins et. al., 1983), use of social support (Burda et. al., 1984), and marital satisfaction (Antill, 1983).

However, outcomes may become more hazardous when one trait takes over too much control of the personality, or becomes “unmitigated.” Unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion have both been shown to lead to poor outcomes in physical and psychological health, as well as in relationships (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999). Unmitigated agency is defined as a focus on the self to the extent of the exclusion of others, or excessive agency without communion. It is often recognized by features like hostility, greed, and arrogance; such individuals may have trouble forming satisfying relationships (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000). It is

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related to a lack of agreeableness and conscientiousness, but high neuroticism (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006). It has also been linked to substance abuse (Snell et. al., 1987), extreme Type A behavior (Hegelson, 1990), and excessive interpersonal control (Fritz & Hegleson, 1998). Unmitigated agency and its associated outcomes are more common in males than females (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999). Unmitigated communion, on the other hand, is a focus on others at the expense of focus on the self, or excessive communion without agency. This tendency to place others' needs before your own has been linked to depression (Hegleson & Fritz, 1999), submission, overinvolvement, low self-esteem, and self-neglect (Fritz & Hegelson, 1998). It may be related to psychological distress because such people tend to become preoccupied with the problems of others, taking on others' distress as their own (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999). Unmitigated communion and its associated outcomes are more common in females than males (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999).

Furthermore, both unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion have been linked to low self-esteem (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999, Hegelson & Fritz, 2000), problems in school and work (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000), and lower levels of overall well-being (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999). Both may lead to problems in interpersonal relationships, though for different reasons. The unmitigated agency individual has conflict in relationships due to his excessive self-involvement and neglect of others' needs. Relationship conflict arises for the unmitigated communion individual because he is overly involved and overprotective to the point of being intrusive (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000). Both traits also lead people to be unwilling to seek and receive help when they need it. The unmitigated agency individual does not want to appear weak or thinks others are incapable of helping, while the unmitigated communion individual does not want to burden or annoy others (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000). Additionally, both are related to poor health behavior. Unmitigated agency gives people extreme confidence in themselves and their bodies,

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making them unlikely to respond favorably to someone else's health suggestions. Unmitigated communion individuals are so focused on caring for others that they unintentionally neglect to be proactive in their own health (Hegelson & Fritz, 2000).

Although there is abundant research linking unmitigated agency and communion to maladaptive health and relationship outcomes, there has been little research exploring the potential for these unmitigated traits to negatively impact *moral* behavior. Frimer and colleagues have linked (normal, mitigated) agency and communion to positive moral outcomes, showing that the ability to integrate high levels of both agency and communion in one's personality can lead to exceptional moral behavior (Frimer et. al., 2011, Frimer et. al., 2012). Similar research has also shown that communal values positively predicted and agentic values negatively predicted moral behavior, while coordinating both communal and agentic values positively predicted moral behavior (Frimer & Walker, 2009). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the inability to integrate agency and communion—or displaying tendencies toward unmitigated agency or communion—would be detrimental to moral behavior. New potential connections between the unmitigated forms of agency and communion and *negative* moral outcomes will be explored in the current study. To understand these moral outcomes, we must first understand the psychology of the moral personality.

The social-cognitive theory of moral character places an emphasis on morality's centrality to self-identity and its accessibility in the mind while navigating the social world (Lapsley, 2016). For some, disregarding these moral schemas when presented the opportunity is acceptable. Moral disengagement is this process of convincing oneself that moral standards don't apply in a certain situation, so as to allow for immoral behavior without self-condemnation (Bandura, 1996.) It is suggested that if motivation is strong enough, an individual will morally

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disengage in order to complete a certain task or perform a certain behavior, even if it goes against his traditional moral standards. Thus, moral disengagement can serve to produce negative outcomes in moral behavior. For example, when people justify to themselves the rightness of their actions by portraying them as serving some greater social purpose, they become willing to act in service of that purpose, no matter what it might be (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). A person may convince himself that he isn't responsible for a certain immoral act, instead diffusing responsibility to some social pressure or outside dictate (Bandura, 1996). Such diffusion of responsibility has been shown to lead to a disinhibition of aggression resulting in punitive behaviors (Bandura et.al., 1975). Other moral disengagement strategies, like describing actions with euphemistic language, disregarding the consequences of an action, or dehumanizing victims, all help to further the potential for immoral decision making. Therefore, we see the potential for a yet-unexplored link between maladaptive levels of agency and communion and such moral disengagement. If agency or communion are prominent enough in the personality, they may serve as motivation to help people justify to themselves immoral behavior that serves the purpose of promoting their own agency or communion.

Alternatively, for other individuals, moral virtues are essential to the self and unlikely to be disengaged. This moral identity is a self-regulatory concept that works to promote moral behavior (Blasi, 1984). People who possess a moral identity see "being a moral person" as extremely important in their everyday lives. Social-cognitive theorists posit that having a moral identity means that moral constructs are chronically accessible in the mind, easily activated by primes encountered in the social context (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004). A moral identity competes with other identities within the self, but for some individuals, it is an absolutely central tenet to their self-concept. Because of this, these people readily access their moral schemas while in

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various situations, and are thus more likely to complete moral actions (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity has been significantly associated with prosocial behavior, ethical behavior, and avoidance of antisocial behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Thus, moral identity can serve as a buffer against moral disengagement. For example, people with a strong moral identity are less willing to promote derogation toward members of an out-group (Smith et. al., 2014). Furthermore, a strong moral identity has been shown to weaken the link between moral disengagement and aggression in adolescents (Hardy et. al.,2014). Because of these trends, we suspect that moral identity would also serve to buffer against the potential for moral disengagement brought about by maladaptive levels of agency and communion.

Combining these concepts creates the potential to find a new, interesting link between agency and communion and moral behavior. Although we suspect high levels of agency or communion may lead to moral disengagement to achieve certain goals, moral identity should serve to moderate those effects.

Hypotheses

We hypothesize that if agency or communion levels are high enough, they will serve as motivating factors to achieve a goal in line with one's personality, no matter the moral cost. We expect that an individual who is high in agency would be willing to morally disengage in order to achieve an agentic goal, whereas an individual who is high in communion would be willing to morally disengage in order to achieve a communal goal. However, if an individual possesses high moral identity centrality, these effects would be buffered. For example, moral identity would prevent a person who is high in agency from morally disengaging on an agentic task on which they otherwise typically would.

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Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 316 undergraduate students from a mid-sized private university in the American Midwest. (% female and % male). Participants came from each grade level and the sample's religious and ethno-racial makeup was comparable to that of the school's student body as a whole. Recruitment occurred via SONA, an online database of psychology research studies going on at the university. Any student may gain access to SONA and sign up to participate in studies for class credit or financial reward. The current study was advertised on the website as an online investigation into personality and behavior, requiring questionnaires and puzzles to be completed for the chance to win a \$100 Amazon gift card or a \$100 donation to a charity of the participant's choosing. The study was completed entirely online using the survey-hosting website, Qualtrics.

Procedure

After obtaining consent, participants completed four questionnaire-style measures, presented in random order. The Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence et. al, 1979) assessed levels of agency and communion and tendencies towards unmitigated agency, while the Unmitigated Communion Scale (Hegelson, 1993) assessed participants' tendencies towards unmitigated communion. The Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) measured participants' self-importance of moral identity, and the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et. al, 1996) assessed their tendencies toward moral disengagement.

Following the questionnaires, participants each completed two behavioral tasks, presented in random order. The tasks were intended to potentially elicit moral disengagement

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towards agentic or communal goals. In the first task, participants were given a list of five words to unscramble in four minutes. They were told that for each word they successfully unscrambled, their name would be entered once into a lottery to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. After the 4-minute work period, participants self-reported the number of anagrams they correctly solved (0-5), so they could potentially seek to earn five entries into the prize drawing. However, three of the letter combinations given were unsolvable, so any participant who self-reported a number over two was deemed to have cheated. Regardless of the number reported, all participants were entered into the drawing once. Since the participants' goal in this task was to earn money for themselves, this task was considered agentic. If a participant cheated on the task, it was determined that they morally disengaged in order to achieve an agentic goal.

Similarly, the second task gave participants the opportunity to morally disengage in order to achieve a communal goal. In this task, participants were given another list of five words to unscramble in four minutes. This time, they were told that for every word they successfully unscrambled, the name of a charity of their choice would be entered into a drawing to receive an anonymous cash donation of \$100. Participants could choose an option from a provided list of charities or enter the name of their own choice. As in the previous task, only two anagrams were solvable, so if the participant self-reported solving more than two, we could conclude that they cheated. Thus, they morally disengaged in order to achieve the communal goal of donating money to charity. Regardless of the self-report results, each charity was entered once into the drawing and a single \$100 donation will be made to the winning charity.

Measures

Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire. The Extended PAQ was used to assess participants' tendencies towards agency, communion, or unmitigated agency (Spence et. al,

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1979). This measure consists of 24 items, each of which assesses a certain aspect of a participant's personality. Participants are asked to answer, on a 5-point Likert scale, how well a given attribute describes them. For example, one item offers a range from "1 = not at all egotistical" to "5 = very egotistical" and the participants are to select the point on the scale which best describes them. Eight items correspond to agency (independent, active, competitive, can make decisions easily, never gives up, very self-confident, feels very superior, stands up well under pressure), eight correspond to communion (emotional, easy to devote self to others, gentle, helpful, kind, aware of others' feelings, understanding, warm), and eight correspond to unmitigated agency (arrogant, boastful, egotistical, greedy, dictatorial, cynical, hostile, looks out for self). Cronbach's alphas for the agency, communion, and unmitigated item subscales were .70, .72, and .76, respectively. An aggregate score for each subset of attributes was calculated for each participant.

Unmitigated Communion Scale. Since the Extended PAQ does not have a method to assess unmitigated communion, the Unmitigated Communion Scale was also administered (Hegelson, 1993). This scale consists of eight items ($\alpha=.72$) such as "I always place the needs of my family above my own" and "I am unable to say no when someone asks me for help." Participants answer how true these statements are in their own lives on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = Does not describe me" to "5 = Describes me extremely well." Responses were coded to create an aggregate score revealing each participant's tendencies toward unmitigated communion.

Moral Identity Scale. The Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) presents nine characteristics of a moral person (caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, hardworking, helpful, honest, kind), then asks participants to imagine what a person with these characteristics

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would be like. Participants then answer 5 items, on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” that assess how important it is to them to be a person with these characteristics. For example, one item says “Being a person who has these types of characteristics is an important part of who I am,” while another says “Having these characteristics is not really that important to me.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .67. Responses were coded to give participants an aggregate score that reflects their moral identity centrality.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale. This scale consists of 32 items reflecting various actions signifying moral disengagement (Bandura et. al, 1996). The participants read the item, like “It is alright to beat someone who bad mouths your family,” for example, then indicates their agreement with the statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” The scale was found to be highly reliable. ($\alpha=.89$) Responses were then coded to reveal an aggregate score reflecting a participant’s tendencies towards moral disengagement.

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