

## Research article

# Self-judgment and reputation monitoring as a function of the fundamental dimensions, temporal perspective, and culture

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### Abstract

*Social acceptance and the development of one's competencies and status are fundamental aspects of the human experience, but the former (communion) should take precedence over the latter (agency) in self-judgment. Study 1 results indicated that (i) people across two cultures judged themselves as possessing higher communion than agency characteristics; (ii) communion self-judgments were more consistent across temporal perspective; and (iii) level of self-enhancement across cultures was similar for communion but different for agency. In Study 2, people across culture reported being more troubled and demonstrated a greater desire to repair their reputation when they imagined others perceived them as lacking in communion compared with agency. These findings support the idea that social life pressures people to view themselves as possessing communion traits and to ensure that others have this perception as well. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Despite the complexity of modern life compared with just a century ago, and even more starkly to 10 000 years ago, much remains the same in terms of the challenges that humans—as a social species—have to deal with. Throughout history, people have had to face two core, recurring challenges. One deals with the need to gain social acceptance and to establish supportive social connections with others. The second deals with the need to attain competencies and status (Chance, 1988; Hogan, 1983; Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). These two evolutionary necessities have been related to the fundamental dimensions of social judgment, namely *communion* and *agency*, which are used to describe various psychological phenomena in personality, social psychology, and related disciplines (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). In the present study, we examined the importance of the fundamental dimensions of communion and agency in self-judgment and people's concerns with maintaining their reputations.

### *Life's Recurring Challenges and the Fundamental Dimensions*

Traits and behaviors from the communion dimension, such as those related to honesty and kindness, are relevant to group living and a sense of right and wrong in interpersonal relationships, and in this way, they have implications for people's need to be accepted and to form social connections. On the contrary, traits and behaviors related to the agency dimension, such as intelligence and ambitiousness, have implications for attaining skills, talent, and status (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008).

The communion and agency dimensions are examined in a host of research areas in psychology. Research that touches on the fundamental dimensions, for example, has been conducted in person perception (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekanathan, 1968), group formation in organizations (Hammer & Organ, 1978), social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), political attitudes (Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996), love (Wojciszke, 2002), conflict resolution (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992), and implicit motives (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). Thus, despite the seeming diversity in content areas just described, the fundamental dimensions of communion and agency appear to help structure how people make sense of others around them (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008).

Given their pervasiveness in the judgment of others, it may be that the fundamental dimensions also comprise important aspects of self-knowledge and self-judgment. There are some suggestions of this in the literature. For example, research that has examined behavior prediction has shown that people judge themselves as more likely to engage in moral and intellectual acts than their peers (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Epley & Dunning, 2000), although the social comparison tendency is less pronounced for intellectual acts (Allison et al., 1989; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). In examining self-esteem, Tafarodi and colleagues made a distinction between self-liking and self-competence, with self-liking having communion implications (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). The two dimensions also appear to be reflected in work dealing with intrinsic and achievement-related selves (Schimmel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001), impression management

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(interpersonal relations versus competence) (Schlenker, 1975), and research on the effects of ingratiation on how others evaluate the self (Gordon, 1996). Recently, the distinction has been applied to the group level self-concept as well, showing a prominent role of morality in how people evaluate ingroups (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Paulhus and John (1998) suggest that people tend to see themselves not only as both exceptionally good members of society, which is related to communion but also as prominent and talented (related to agency) (also see Hogan, 1983; Leary, 1957).

### *Implications of the Fundamental Dimensions for Self-Judgment*

Although previous findings suggest that the fundamental dimensions of communion and agency are reflected in the content of self-judgment, little of that research has been explicitly linked to the dimensions or to related theoretical analyses. The present approach explicitly relates the study of self-judgment to the fundamental dimensions.

An important consequence of doing this is that the present research provides a common lens through which to view diverse findings dealing with self-judgment. Furthermore, the theoretical framework and supporting evidence reveal important implications for why people should draw distinctions and give greater weight to one dimension over the other in self-judgment, for the judged stability and malleability of the communion and agency self-aspects across temporal perspective, for not only cultural differences but also similarities in self-judgment, and how this collection of self-judgment implications can be linked to the differential concerns people have regarding their reputations on the two dimensions.

### **Reputation Monitoring and the Primacy of Communion over Agency**

Of the two core challenges people face as social beings—social acceptance and the need to attain competencies and status—we argue that social acceptance is key. Social acceptance is a driving concern because it provides group members with protection and security (e.g., Dunbar & Shultz, 2007), in addition to helping provide opportunities for obtaining sustenance, mates, and meaning systems (Barash, 1986). The varied benefits people derive from their social connections with others necessitates that they generally abide by group norms, cooperate, and engage in reciprocal exchange, which should serve as the basis for people giving greater weight to the communion dimension in monitoring their reputations. Before discussing these and other predictions in more detail, it is important to consider a related issue of whether people, for example from different cultural traditions, should be expected to differ in how they judge the self on the two dimensions.

The fundamental dimensions of communion and agency are related to collectivistic (interdependent) and individualistic (independent) values, respectively (Wojciszke, 1997). Although there is a tendency in cultural psychology research to emphasize differences between valuing the collective versus the individual (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995), what should not be ignored is that group living and the valuing of relationships

is something most people do. In fact, individuals who are excluded from groups, or have few social connections, suffer in myriad ways (e.g., Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Ybarra, Chan, et al., 2008). In addition, that a cultural group shows a *relatively* greater emphasis on relationships or on the individual need not imply the absence of the other value (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Also, in terms of process, there is a constant psychological dynamic in people to negotiate the need to be connected to others with the need to be independent (Bergson, 1920; Brewer, 2003); people have to both get along and get ahead. We acknowledge this complexity in terms of self-judgment. However, we propose that one of these goals and its relevant dimension (communion) dominates, although occasional shifts in the valuing of agency can occur.

Although cross cultural research many times focuses on distinguishing groups based on collectivistic (interdependent) and individualistic (independent) values, the proposed primacy of communion over agency in self-judgment fits well with other research on values and research on how people conceive of competencies and intelligence. Extensive analyses have shown across many different cultures that the values people endorse as most important are benevolence values, such as being helpful, honest, loyal, and responsible (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001)—values that align with the communion dimension. And in a re-analysis of 372 cultural universals in behavior practices, Ybarra and colleagues found that most of these universals are communion related (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). So, what is more similar across culture are values and behavior practices related to the communion dimension.

In contrast, research has shown that people from different cultures differ more in what they consider to be intelligence and competence (e.g., Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993). Recent cross-cultural work on how people attribute traits to others reinforces this view—in addition to finding cultural similarity in the attribution of communion traits, this research found cultural differences in the attribution of agentic traits (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). Thus, from a cultural psychology perspective, different lines of research converge to show that most cultural groups place great emphasis on the communion dimension and have similar understandings of it, but that agency as a category of traits and behaviors may be more labile.

### *Implications for Self-Judgment and Self-Enhancement*

To further draw out the implications of the fundamental dimensions for self-judgment, we bring in research from social perception. This research has been used exclusively to explain the perception of others but not self-judgment (for a recent exception investigating group level self-concept, see Leach et al., 2007).

Because communion norms generally tend to be stable and highly positive (groups demand consistent, socially desirable behavior; Ybarra, 2002), they do two things. First, they mask a person's "true" communal character as the norm for everybody is to have high communion standing. Furthermore, the backdrop of relatively uniform, positive communion behavior highlights any transgression, enabling very little negative communion information to tarnish one's reputation in the eyes of others (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). Research has shown, for example, that perceivers

efficiently process such transgressions or communal failures (Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001) and remember them well (Ybarra & Stephan, 1996).

In terms of agency, unlike the communion dimension, negative agency behaviors are tolerated (relatively) in others. This is the case because skills and competencies develop with time and practice (cf. Fleeson & Heckhausen, 1997) and also because skilled performances are more likely to vary across situations and contexts (e.g., at times that spear toss will miss, as might one's judgment) (Hyman, 2002). Coupled with the existence of information asymmetries and uneven distribution of learning opportunities (Hayek, 1945), and the limited occasions for creating a talent niche (e.g., only one person may be needed for a particular job or task), these processes converge to tolerate, in a relative sense, more shortfalls and variation in how people manifest agency (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). So, although there should be pressure on individuals to attain skills, to excel, and to try to achieve, this can often be subordinated to the pressure to be good group members. This is not to say that there will never be occasions in which the agency dimension will acquire salience (e.g., an entrepreneurial opportunity within an organization, or a competition). However, the communion dimension should continue to play a pervasive role in self-judgment.

As a whole, integrating these lines of research leads to the proposal that high communion standing and maintaining one's reputations on this dimension should be a powerful motivator for people, which is why people should judge themselves highly on the communion dimension. In addition, given that group living is a practice of all known human groups (Brown, 1991; Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008; Ybarra, Chan, et al., 2008), the importance of being a good group member and being accepted by others should make it likely that across cultural traditions, people will place greater weight (and show more similarity) on the communion aspects of the self. Finally, because of its importance in how people think of and judge themselves, people should judge the self highly on the communion dimension consistently across temporal perspective (e.g., in the past I was a good person; in the future I will continue to be a good person). Although some research suggests that people judge the self differently across time (Wilson & Ross, 2001), as we discuss after presenting the results to Study 1, a closer look suggests the overwhelming use of agency and not communion-related characteristics in that research. This leads to *Hypothesis 1*, which we test in Study 1.

*Hypothesis 1:* People should consistently judge that they are good group members, judging themselves as possessing higher levels of communion characteristics than agency characteristics. This self-judgment tendency should hold across temporal perspective and culture.

In addition to an overall difference in self-judgment on the communion compared with agency dimension, we derive other predictions that deal with self-enhancement and culture. Some studies suggest that people from East Asian cultures self-enhance less than Westerners (e.g., Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). However, other research indicates that East Asians (Japanese) self-enhance on traits related to communion (e.g., cooperation) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; also see

Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), whereas Westerners self-enhance more than East Asians on traits related to agency (Heine et al., 2000). Thus, cultural differences in self-enhancement may partly depend on the dimension of social comparison. We have argued that group living is a feature of all groups, which makes distinguishing the self on the communion dimension challenging because most people attempt to abide by positive communion norms. This should help prompt stronger self-other distinctions. The nature of the agency dimension, as discussed earlier, permits more shortfalls but also variation in people's enactment of agency-related behaviors across contexts, including cultural ones (e.g., Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993; Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). This leads to Hypothesis 2, which we also test in Study 1.

*Hypothesis 2:* People should consistently judge themselves as possessing higher levels of communion characteristics than a comparison other. This self-judgment tendency should hold across temporal perspective and culture. Self-enhancement on the agency dimension should be less extreme and vary more as a function of temporal perspective and culture.

The nature of the fundamental dimensions also has crucial implications for how people attempt to manage the impressions they make on others. As we have been arguing, maintaining communion-related reputations, compared with agency ones, is a constant pressure on people. This is partly the case because communion-related shortfalls, compared with agency-related slips, are harder to undo and should have a more far-reaching impact on reputations and social acceptance. This leads to Hypothesis 3, which we test in Study 2.

*Hypothesis 3:* If people are driven more to maintain communion compared with agency reputations, they should find it more upsetting when their reputations on the communion dimension are at stake, and they should be more willing to exert effort to correct mistaken communion versus agency impressions, a finding that should hold across culture.

### Overview of Studies

To test our ideas, we conducted two studies. The first study involved self-judgment with regard to three contexts: temporal, cultural, and social comparison. Study 2 tested implications of the Study 1 findings by assessing people's vexations and motivation to repair their reputations after imagining accusations of a failure on the communion or agency dimension. In both studies, we compared the responses of American and Korean participants. We chose these two countries because previous research has emphasized their differences, for example, in terms of independence and interdependence (e.g., Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003). But it is also important to note that recent research has found not only differences between the two groups but also similarities. Specifically, Ybarra, Burnstein, et al. (2008) showed that how Americans and Koreans attributed traits to others on the communion dimension was more similar than how they attributed traits related to agency, findings relevant to the present framework in that in addition to expecting cultural differences, the analysis



predicts cultural similarities because of the importance people should grant the communion dimension in judging the self.

## STUDY 1

In this study, we compared the self-judgment patterns of respondents who rated themselves on a set of communion and agency traits. Participants answered these same questions for different points in their lives (past, present, future). They also answered the same questions in judging a comparison other, allowing us to examine tendencies to self-enhance.

### Method

#### Materials

To ensure that incidental aspects of the trait stimuli did not affect the judgment patterns (i.e., stimuli did not vary as a function of dimension and culture), we extensively pilot-tested the traits. Both the pretests and the main study were conducted in the participants' native language. The materials were originally developed in English, and then translated and back-translated by two bilingual research assistants to ensure that the English and Korean versions were equivalent in meaning<sup>1</sup>.

#### Design and Participants for Main Study

For the main study, 67 students from the University of Michigan (30 men and 37 women,  $M$  age = 19.04 years) and 60 students from Seoul National University, Korea (41 men and 19 women,  $M$  age = 20.65 years) participated for course credit. Four US participants completed the measures incorrectly, leaving a total of 123 participants. One additional participant from USA had missing data, accounting for the slight variation in degrees of freedom across analyses. All participants used a scale from 0 (*much less than most*) to 10 (*much more than most*) to judge how much they possessed each of the 12 traits for three different periods (*age 16, current age, and age 30*). The periods were selected to demarcate their past (high school) from their present (in college) and their future lives (post school). They made the same set of judgments for the comparison other (typical student at their university of same age and gender) for a total of 72 judgments. The traits were presented in one random order, and the judgment task was counterbalanced across period and target (self first versus other first), resulting in 12 different orders. Within a particular order, the participants always judged the same target first

<sup>1</sup>Three sets of pilot-test participants, both from USA and Korea, were asked to judge the 12 traits on their perceived desirability (1: *highly undesirable*, 8: *highly desirable*), perceived malleability (1: *very stable*, 8: *very malleable*), and perceived verifiability (1: *very easy to determine by others I do (do not) possess*, 8: *very difficult to determine by others I do (do not) possess*). The 12 traits included both positive and negative characteristics, and half were related to the communion dimension (trustworthy, malevolent, polite, injurious, benevolent, and rude) and half to the agency dimension (purposeful, haphazard, diligent, inept, knowledgeable, and lazy). None of the pre-tests produced main effects as a function of dimension, and no interactions were found as a function of dimension X culture. Only one analysis for trait verifiability produced a main effect of culture,  $F(1, 40) = 9.51$ ,  $p < .004$ , indicating that overall Koreans ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) judged the traits as more verifiable than did Americans ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ).

followed by the second target. There were no significant order effects. After completing the dependent measure, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

### Results

#### Self-Judgment

Participants' self-trait ratings were reverse scored where necessary so that higher numbers represent higher trait endorsements. We then computed two composite scores (communion, agency) for each period (Cronbach alphas ranged from .73 to .82 for Americans and from .72 to .83 for Koreans). Participants' self-judgment scores were submitted to a 2 (cultural heritage: American versus Korean)  $\times$  2 (dimension: communion versus agency)  $\times$  3 (temporal perspective: past, present, future) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA). There was a main effect of dimension,  $F(1, 120) = 28.93$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.46$ . This effect indicated—consistent with *Hypothesis 1*—that self-judgments on the communion dimension ( $M = 7.61$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) were of greater magnitude than self-judgments on the agency dimension ( $M = 7.12$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ).

A critical aspect of Hypothesis 1 is that people should judge themselves as possessing higher levels of communion than agency characteristics, and do so across temporal perspective (see Figure 1). We conducted planned contrasts to test this. In terms of the self in the past, participants judged the self as higher on the communion than agency characteristics,  $F(1, 122) = 9.27$ ,  $p < .004$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.26$ . But this was also the case for the present,  $F(1, 121) = 49.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.71$ , and also the future,  $F(1, 122) = 6.49$ ,  $p = .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.22$ . Thus, across all periods, self-judgment was consistently higher for the communion than the agency dimension.

In terms of the potential influence of culture, the overall analysis yielded a significant three-way interaction involving dimension, period, and culture,  $F(2, 240) = 3.06$ ,  $p = .05$ . To parse the effect, we performed comparisons between communion and agency judgments for each period, as done above, but as a function of culture. In judging the self in the past, the analysis yielded only an effect of dimension,  $F(1, 121) = 9.14$ ,  $p < .004$ , with communion self-judgments being higher than agency judgments. In judging the self in the present, the analysis produced a main effect of dimension,  $F(1, 120) = 51.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , again showing higher judgments

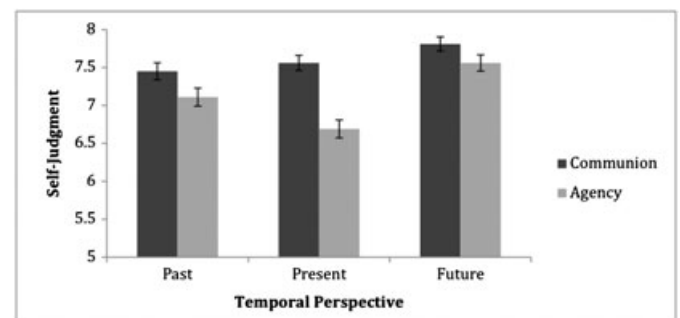


Figure 1. Self-judgment as a function of dimension and temporal perspective, Study 1

for the communion dimension. For this comparison, there was a marginal interaction between dimension and culture,  $F(1, 120)=3.17, p=.08$ . Of greater interest, this effect indicated no difference between cultures for the communion dimension,  $F < 1.00$ . However, the agency dimension produced a reliable simple effect,  $F(1, 120)=7.22, p < .009$ , Cohen's  $d=0.48$ , with Americans rating themselves higher than the Koreans. Finally, for judgments about the future self, the analysis yielded only an effect of dimension,  $F(1, 121)=6.60, p < .02$ , with communion self-judgments being higher than agency judgments.

As an alternative way to look at the temporal variable, we calculated total absolute change in self-judgment across period for each trait composite score (i.e., taking the absolute differences between present and future and between present and past, and summing these), with larger numbers indicating greater change. These scores were submitted to a 2 (cultural heritage: American versus Korean)  $\times$  2 (dimension: communion versus agency) mixed ANOVA. The analysis yielded main effects of country and dimension. The country main effect indicated that Koreans expressed more overall change in their self-judgments ( $M=3.64, SD=1.94$ ) than the Americans ( $M=2.86, SD=1.24$ ),  $F(1, 120)=7.01, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d=0.48$ . The dimension effect indicated that change across temporal perspective was greater for judgments on the agency ( $M=2.02, SD=1.26$ ) than communion dimension ( $M=1.24, SD=0.83$ ),  $F(1, 120)=41.64, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=0.73$ . Planned comparisons indicated that the change scores on the communion dimension did not differ as a function of culture (USA:  $M=1.14, SD=0.63$  versus Korea:  $M=1.34, SD=0.99$ ,  $F(1, 121)=1.64, p=.20$ ). However, for the agency dimension, there was a cultural difference ( $F(1, 120)=6.80, p=.01$ ), indicating that Korean participants ( $M=2.31, SD=1.47$ ) expressed more change on this dimension than the Americans ( $M=1.73, SD=0.94$ ), Cohen's  $d=0.47$ .

#### Self-Enhancement as a Function of Fundamental Dimension and Culture

We now turn to the culture and self-enhancement hypotheses. As done earlier for the self-ratings, the ratings given for the comparison other were reverse scored where necessary so that higher numbers represent the degree to which others are seen as possessing the different traits. Participants' scores for self and other were submitted to a 2 (cultural heritage: American versus Korean)  $\times$  2 (target: self versus other)  $\times$  2 (dimension: communion versus agency)  $\times$  3 (temporal perspective: past, present, future) mixed ANOVA. The overall analysis produced a main effect of target,  $F(1, 120)=76.22, p < .001$ , with participants overall judging the self more positively than the comparison other ( $M=7.36$  versus  $M=6.70$ ). There also was an interaction of target and culture,  $F(1, 120)=22.72, p < .001$ , indicating self-enhancement was greater for Americans ( $F(1, 61)=104.23, p < .001$ ;  $M=7.42$  versus  $M=6.40$ ) than the Koreans ( $F(1, 59)=6.93, p < .02, M=7.30$  versus  $M=7.00$ ). From our perspective, however, whether self-judgment and other judgment involve communion or agency should also matter.

The overall three-way interaction of culture, target, and dimension was marginally significant,  $F(1, 120)=3.21, p=.08$ . However, planned comparisons indicated that both

the Americans ( $F(1, 62)=152.27, p < .001$ ) and Koreans ( $F(1, 59)=46.97, p < .001$ ) judged themselves more highly than the comparison other on the communion dimension (see Figure 2). However, on the agency dimension, the Americans still judged the self more highly than the comparison other ( $F(1, 61)=21.82, p < .001$ ), but the Koreans actually showed a reversal, judging the other more highly than the self ( $F(1, 59)=5.20, p=.026$ ).

These effects for communion did not differ much when examined at each period. For past judgments, Americans endorsed communion characteristics in self to a greater extent than for other,  $F(1, 62)=108.65, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=1.31$ . The Korean sample showed the same pattern,  $F(1, 59)=31.33, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=.72$ . For the present, the Americans also endorsed communion characteristics in self to a greater extent than for other,  $F(1, 62)=105.84, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=1.33$ , a pattern expressed by the Koreans as well,  $F(1, 59)=32.17, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=0.87$ . A similar pattern was obtained for the future self (USA: ( $F(1, 62)=83.74, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=1.11$ ); Korea: ( $F(1, 59)=43.10, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=0.91$ )). Thus, consistently across time, both groups judged the self more positively than a comparison other on the communion dimension, although the Americans displayed self-enhancement that was relatively larger in magnitude.

Examination of the temporal effects for agency yielded a different story. For past judgments, Americans endorsed agency characteristics in self to a greater extent than for other,  $F(1, 62)=27.68, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d=.61$ , but the Koreans did not show a difference,  $F(1, 59) < 1.00$ . For the present, the Americans once again endorsed agency characteristics in self to a greater extent than for other,  $F(1, 61)=11.63, p < .002$ , Cohen's  $d=0.39$ , but in this case, the Koreans showed a reversal and actually endorsed agency-related traits in other to a greater extent than the self,  $F(1, 59)=13.17, p < .002$ , Cohen's  $d=-0.59$ . Finally, for future judgments, the American sample still endorsed agency traits in the future more highly for self than other, ( $F(1, 62)=7.03, p < .02$ , Cohen's  $d=0.33$ ), albeit to a lesser extent than for other periods, but the Koreans did not differ in how they judged self and other ( $F(1, 59)=1.94, p=.17$ ).

## Discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the findings indicated that people judged themselves as having higher levels of communion than agency characteristics, a tendency that occurred when we

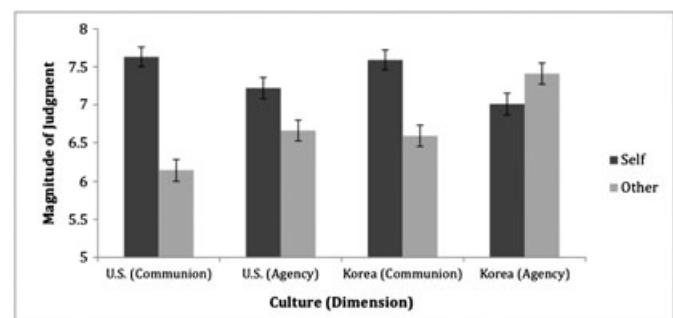


Figure 2. Self and other judgment as a function of dimension and culture, Study 1

examined each period separately. When examined as change-scores, self-judgment showed greater temporal consistency for the communion than agency dimension. Finally, in judging the self, culture and temporal dimension were only implicated for the agency dimension. In terms of Hypothesis 2, which involved examining self-enhancement and culture, the findings indicated greater self-enhancement for the communion dimension than agency dimension and that temporal perspective curbed self-enhancement on the agency dimension but not the communion dimension. Finally, although Americans in general self-enhanced to a greater extent than Koreans, both groups self-enhanced on the communion dimension and yet only Americans self-enhanced on the agency dimension. The effects for agency may reflect more malleability in how different cultural traditions attribute agency-related characteristics and the extent to which context can influence those interpretations. As a whole, the findings support *Hypotheses 1 and 2*.

Previous research found that people tend to judge themselves as more likely to engage in communion-related acts than their peers (Epley & Dunning, 2000), but this tendency is less pronounced for behaviors and characteristics related to agency (Allison et al., 1989; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). The present results are consistent with such findings but extend them in several ways by examining factors related to temporal perspective and culture.

In terms of temporal perspective, the present results showed that people judged the communion aspects of the self more positively than agency-related aspects, a tendency that occurred in judging the past self but also the future self. These temporal findings follow from the present analysis but might invite some surprise when viewed from the lens of temporal self-appraisal theory. Temporal appraisal theory proposes that people will show variation over time because they tend to derogate past selves in general, especially the more distant the past self appears to the person and the more important the episode is thought to be (Wilson & Ross, 2001). The present findings showing differences between the two dimensions were obtained across culture (more similar for communion across temporal perspective compared with agency). So, how are the different results to be reconciled?

What is important to note about the main empirical work supporting temporal appraisal theory (Wilson & Ross, 2001) is that of the five studies that provided trait characteristics for participants to use in rating themselves, the great majority of the characteristics appear related to agency. For example, the list of traits used in their Study 6 included self-confident, independent/self-reliant, adapt well to new situations, serious about school, self-motivated, satisfied with life, and socially skilled, which although referring to social aspects was still labeled a skill. The three undesirable traits were narrow-minded, naïve, and immature. In Study 5, the authors examined characteristics and behaviors related to problem solving and conflict resolution skills. In this same study, characteristics that would assay communion more directly (commitment and trust in relationships) were included but were considered irrelevant to the concerns of the study and not analyzed. In their Study 2, Wilson and Ross (2001) did include two characteristics related to communion (dishonest, rude), but these characteristics did not reveal reliable effects in terms of temporal perspective. So,

when examined more closely, the series of studies conducted by Wilson and Ross (2001) seems to provide a model of temporal self-appraisal that applies mainly to agency-related characteristics. The present research, in addition to showing temporal effects for agency, has uncovered different temporal patterns for the communion dimension.

With regard to culture, earlier findings showed that Westerners enhance more than Easterners (Heine et al., 2000), whereas a closer look at some of the findings suggests more cross-cultural similarity in self-enhancement for communion-related domains (Kurman, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2003) but greater differences for characteristics related to agency (Heine et al., 2000). Our findings help resolve some of these inconsistencies as well by showing within the same study that self-enhancement occurred across culture on the communion dimension (although to varying degrees), whereas cultural differences in self-enhancement were pronounced on the agency dimension.

## STUDY 2

The diverse set of findings dealing with self-judgment from Study 1—including differences in magnitude as a function of dimension, differences across temporal perspective, differences in self-enhancement, and differences as a function of culture—follow from the present analysis, which proposes that being accepted by others is a primary motivation relative to the acquisition of skills and status. Agency, although also of importance, is itself enabled by social relations and linked to unevenly distributed opportunities and talent niches. The fundamental dimensions of communion and agency are aligned with these two recurring necessities, respectively (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008). The communion dimension and its related challenge (to be accepted and avoid rejection) pressure consistently for positive behavior and tolerate few, if any, shortfalls compared with the agency dimension. In addition, these pressures at the same time mask the communal character of group members. Consequently, people across culture should be relatively more concerned with their reputations on the communion than agency dimension, especially given the pervasive, moral, and many times automatic nature of social judgment (Haidt, 2001). Thus, people may attempt to assure themselves and others of their high communal standing.

In Study 2, we wanted to test *Hypothesis 3* and directly assess people's concerns about their reputations on the two dimensions. The results from Study 1 indicate that people across cultures endorse communion compared with agency self-aspects more highly. If such an emphasis is geared toward the greater need to maintain communion reputations, then we expected that participants would indicate that it was more important to maintain their reputations on the communion than agency dimension. Thus, a suggestion by others that one has failed to live up to a positive communion reputation—compared with an agency-related reputation—should be more psychologically vexing, and people should be more motivated to repair their tarnished reputation (for related arguments, see Leach et al., 2007).



## Method

### Materials and Procedure

Depending on condition, we provided participants with one of two scenarios in which they imagined themselves as the target of someone else's suspicions and accusations. The scenarios were created so that the only information that varied described a claim by observers that the participant had failed to uphold either their communion or agency standing. Considering that we sampled University students, our scenarios reflected two salient reputational concerns—others believing that one had failed an examination (agency) or others believing one had cheated on an examination (communion). The scenarios were translated from English to Korean and then back-translated to ensure equivalence in meaning.

To validate the scenarios, we recruited student volunteers from USA ( $n=18$ ) and Korea ( $n=15$ ) to answer three questions in response to them. One question was designed to confirm that the scenarios did not differ in other ways that could serve as alternative explanations, namely frequency of occurrence. After reading the scenario and imagining themselves in it, participants responded on a four-point scale (0 = not at all to 3 = often) to "In your opinion, how often do students talk to other classmates about such suspicions?" An analysis with culture and condition as between-participant factors yielded no reliable main effects or interactions.

Participants responded to two other questions to assess concerns with social acceptance and their reputations, also on four-point scales (e.g., 0 = not at all to 3 = very concerned). These were "If your friends and others you know found out about these suspicions, how concerned would you be that they would no longer accept you as part of their group?" and "How troubled would you be about your reputation in the eyes of others?" Responses to the two items were correlated ( $r=.53$ ), so we averaged them to create an index of being concerned about the event, and this score was submitted to the same  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA. The analysis produced a main effect of condition,  $F(1, 29) = 15.33, p < .002$ , with the communion condition ( $M = 3.20, SD = 0.66$ ) producing more concerns than the agency condition ( $M = 2.34, SD = 0.79$ ). The analysis also produced a main effect of culture,  $F(1, 29) = 7.81, p < .01$ , indicating in general that the Koreans ( $M = 3.10, SD = 0.74$ ) were relatively more concerned than the Americans ( $M = 2.53, SD = 0.85$ ). As a whole, the pilot data validated the differential reputation and social acceptance concerns people have about communion and agency failures in the eyes of others but that the scenarios did not differ in how frequently people are apt to talk to others about their suspicions in the two domains.

### Design and Participants of Main Study

Seventy students from the University of Michigan (33 men,  $M$  age = 18.93 years) and 70 students from Yonsei University in Korea (25 men, 1 unreported;  $M$  age = 23.56 years) participated in this study for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Five participants had missing responses, so the degrees of freedom vary slightly across the analyses. All participants were asked to make judgments about their reactions to an imagined scenario in which they were the target of others'

suspicions and accusations. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they imagined others believed them to have failed on the communion or the agency dimension. Thus, the study used a  $2$  (cultural heritage: American versus Korean)  $\times 2$  (dimension: communion versus agency) design.

Participants were asked to read through the scenario slowly and try to imagine themselves in the situation. They were then given 5 minutes to describe in an open-ended format how they would react to such a situation. Finally, they were presented with the dependent measure, which was composed of 29 items that were answered on seven-point scales (1: *highly unlikely*, 4: *neither unlikely nor likely*, 7: *highly likely*).

As a whole, the 29-item measure was designed to assay the degree to which participants would be vexed and troubled by the imagined situation they found themselves in. Of the 29 items, three were phrased so that higher scores indicated not being concerned with what the other students suspected. Example items included "I would be ashamed to go to class," "I would replay what my classmate had said over and over in my head," "I would call a friend to discuss what I should do," and "I would quickly forget about the students who had been talking about me" (reverse scored) (Cronbach alpha = .94).<sup>2</sup> After completing the dependent measure, the participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their time.

If suspicions about one's communion standing are of greater concern to people than suspicions of one's agency standing, then it was expected that across culture, participants in the communion condition compared with the agency condition would report being more troubled by and a greater willingness to resolve the situation.

## Results and Discussion

We submitted participants' scores to a  $2$  (dimension communion versus agency failure)  $\times 2$  (cultural heritage American versus Korean) between-participants ANOVA. The analysis only yielded a main effect for condition,  $F(1, 131) = 41.03, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.10$ . This result indicated that participants in the communion shortfall condition reported being more troubled and vexed ( $M = 3.23, SD = 1.06$ ) than participants in the agency condition ( $M = 2.20, SD = 0.80$ ). When examined within culture, the pattern was the same. Americans reported being more troubled in the communion ( $M = 3.03, SD = 1.05$ ) than agency shortfall condition ( $M = 2.28, SD = 0.99$ ),  $F(1, 65) = 9.09, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.73$ . The Koreans also reported being more troubled in the communion ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.05$ ) than agency condition ( $M = 2.12, SD = 0.51$ ),  $F(1, 66) = 41.87, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.56$ . Overall, what dominated the results was the greater role that a shortfall on the communion dimension compared with the agency dimension had in

<sup>2</sup>Factor analysis (principal axis, direct oblimin) indicated the measure had a single dominant factor with an eigenvalue of 11.96, accounting for a little over 41% of the variance. The analysis extracted other factors using the eigenvalue rule of 1, but these factors were modest (eigenvalue range = 1.02–2.56). Furthermore, 24 of the 29 items had loadings of .50 or greater on the dominant factor and smaller loadings on the other factors. Of the five items that did not load at the .50 level on the first factor, one item's loading (.35) was still higher than its loading on the other factors. The remaining four items did have higher loadings on other factors, but there was no consistency in what they loaded highest on.

eliciting troubling emotional and cognitive reactions in people and behaviors aimed at quelling those concerns.

These findings expand on those from Study 1. If it is indeed more important for people to maintain their communion relative to their agency reputations, then it follows that participants who imagined others suspected them of communion wrongdoing should be more concerned with repairing their reputations than participants who imagined others questioned their agency standing.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Together the two studies demonstrated that (1) participants from both USA and Korea judged the self as possessing higher levels of communion-related characteristics than agency related characteristics; (2) positive communion self-judgments were more consistent across time than agency judgments; (3) participants from both USA and Korea self-enhanced to a greater extent (and more consistently so) on the communion dimension but differed on the agency dimension; and (4) participants who imagined their communion reputations had been tainted expressed being more troubled and vexed than participants who imagined their agency-related reputations had come under suspicion.

These findings follow from the present analysis, which argues that two evolutionary necessities undergird much of social life, the need to be socially accepted and the need to acquire competencies, accomplishments, and status given available opportunities (Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008; Ybarra, Chan, et al., 2008). We have proposed that the recurring challenge of being accepted by others is a primary motivation relative to the acquisition of skills and status. Psychologically, this differentiation is tied to different factors that drive people to be more concerned with maintaining their reputations regarding communion characteristics. For example, the communion dimension and its related challenge (to be accepted and avoid rejection) pressure consistently for positive behavior, which has the consequence of masking people's communal character and at the same time tolerating few if any shortfalls in behavior (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987; Ybarra, 2001, 2002; Ybarra & Stephan, 1996). Thus, given the ease with which communion reputations can be tarnished and the implications of such a tarnished reputation for social acceptance, people should judge themselves as having high communion standing.

The agency dimension, on the contrary, deals with behaviors and characteristics that people develop over time, perform unevenly for various reasons, and are associated with more limited occasions or opportunities in which they can be expressed. Consequently, there should be relatively less pressure on people to judge themselves positively on the agency compared with the communion dimension, whether or not this involves judging the self or comparing the self with someone else. The findings showing that people were more troubled when others suspected them of shortfalls on the communion dimension further reinforce these interpretations.

These findings contribute to the self-literature in several ways. First, the findings demonstrate that content—namely

the fundamental dimensions—plays an influential role in self-judgment, helping to tie various suggestions of this from the self-literature. In addition, by placing work on the self in the context of emerging frameworks dealing with the fundamental dimensions and life's recurring challenges, the present research has drawn out various implications that are not easily predicted by other frameworks, whether these involve the prediction of magnitude differences in self-judgment, especially across culture, differences between the dimensions as a function of temporal perspective, or differences in self-enhancement.

Furthermore, the present research—by highlighting not only the possibility of cultural differences but also similarities in behavior and judgment—has helped to bring some resolution to conflicting findings in the self-enhancement literature, in that self-enhancement similarities appear across culture on the primary, communion dimension. And it is this consideration of cultural similarities—and not just differences—that helps highlight the importance ascribed by many people to the communion dimension, which also helps link this research with work on value hierarchies across culture (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001) and cultural universals in behavior practices (Brown, 1991; Ybarra, Burnstein, et al., 2008).

Also related to the above discussion, the present findings offer some insights (and evidence) into long-standing issues of stability and malleability in self-views. Specifically, certain self-aspects (communion) appear to occupy a central position in people's views of self, which drives their stability over time and similarity across cultural groups, at least the ones studied in this research. Other self-views (agency) may occupy a less central position owing to various factors. This inherent difference in the dimensions, especially as they relate to reputation monitoring, may provide one way through which the self can be stable yet variable across time and culture.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Some of the present research has dealt with people's perceptions of the self over time, but it also would be useful to collect data that assess people's self-judgments at actual, different points in their lives. In the present study, people made assessments of the self in the present, the past, and the future, but would it be the case that in 5 or 10 years, people's judgments of their communion self would be relatively more similar to current judgments than judgments of their agency self? Such data would inform the issue of the stability and variability of self-judgment across time. Furthermore, such data could also inform issues dealing with the accuracy of self-judgment, in that the need to maintain relatively more consistency on the communion dimension could mask to some degree people's specific level of communality.

Our analysis also suggests that the immediate context may affect some self-judgments more than others. If communion characteristics and behaviors are more central to people's self conceptions and are tied to consistency in their enactment, whereas agency traits and behaviors are more linked to situations and areas of expertise, then it may be that context may play a bigger role in shifting how people view the self on the agency than on the communion dimension. For example, a person may be apt to feel as if they lack knowledge when they



visit the automechanic (assuming they are not mechanically inclined) compared with how they conceive of self when they are engaged in their normal work or profession, for which they have trained. It seems less likely, though, that whether at the mechanic's or at one's job, a person would feel differently about the communion aspects of the self (or less so). Thus, the idea that immediate context can alter one's self views or how one is evaluated for some behavioral tendencies but not others also strikes us as an interesting possibility for future research.

Finally, in terms of reputation monitoring, it is also important to go beyond what we have done in the present research and manipulate people's concerns with their reputations in other ways. In Study 2, people were more vexed and concerned when others suspected them of communion compared with agency-related wrongdoing. In future research, it also might be useful to induce concerns through some actual failure or transgression in the laboratory and assess how people cope with these events.

## Conclusion

Although people have many diverse views of self, when we consider empirical regularities found in many areas of research within social psychology and related disciplines, it is reasonable to propose that some essential aspects of those self-views will deal with the communion and agency dimensions. Furthermore, these dimensions, when situated within a theoretical model about human behavior and recurring life challenges, can offer a coherent analysis for predicting a host of self-judgment phenomena. Humans carry with them the imprint of group life regardless of where they are born. Although norms may differ across culture, for example, in terms of what is judged as accomplishment and talent, what seems relatively unchanging is the need to abide by those norms in order to be accepted socially, and these behavioral tendencies are encapsulated in the communion dimension.

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