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## 8 **The primacy of communion over agency and its reversals in evaluations**

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10 **BOGDAN WOJCISZKE<sup>1\*</sup> AND ANDREA E. ABELE<sup>2</sup>**

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### 14 *Abstract*

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19 *Agency (A) and communion (C) are basic dimensions of social judgment and C is typically more important than A. Building on the two-interest account of bidimensionality of social cognition, we hypothesized that this “C over A” pattern is typical for judging distant persons but is attenuated or even reversed when people judge the self or interdependent persons. In Study 1 we found that the construal of events leading to changes in a target’s evaluation was different in dependence on perspective. There was a “C over A” pattern in case of distant others, but an “A over C” pattern in case of close friends or the self. In Study 2 we found that the degree of dependence on one’s supervisor determined the “C over A” pattern, as well. C was more important for the supervisor’s overall evaluation if there was no dependence, and conversely A was more important in case of dependence. The studies underline the theoretical significance of a social interaction perspective in social judgment, and particularly in judgments on the two basic dimensions. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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There is a remarkable consensus on the basic dimensions underlying judgments of self, persons, and groups (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt & Kashima, 2005). These dimensions are referred to by different names, such as agency versus communion (Abele, 2003; Bakan, 1966), socially versus intellectually good or bad (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivenkananthan, 1968), other-profitability versus self-profitability (Peeters, 1992), morality versus competence (Wojciszke, 2005), and warmth versus competence (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Despite differences in names, research suggests that these conceptual opposites overlap substantially (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007); most researchers agree that one of these dimensions (communion/warmth) pertains to functioning in social relations, while the other (agency/competence) refers to task functioning and goal achievement. Whereas the former involves qualities like warm, kind, helpful, honest, cooperative, and trustworthy (and their opposites), the latter involves qualities like efficient, competent, active, persistent, and energetic (and their opposites).

Numerous studies have found that the communal (C) dimension is more important in person and group perception than the agency (A) dimension. C traits are identified faster in a lexical decision task than A ones (Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001) and chronically accessible descriptors of others pertain to C rather than A (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). When forming global impressions of others, people are more interested in gathering information on C than A, global impressions of real persons are better predicted from C than A trait ascriptions, and that positivity–negativity of evaluative impressions of target persons is based mainly on the C content of behavior, while A information serves only as a modifier of impression intensity. Furthermore, C is more important to the positive evaluation of the in-group and individuals’ identification with their in-group is dependent on ascribing C rather than A to the in-group (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Finally, C traits maintain more stable meanings across cultures and a majority of cultural universals in thought and action refer to C rather than A-related categories (Ybarra, Chan, Park, Burnstein, Monin, & Stanik, 2008).

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There are two major explanations of the bidimensionality of social cognition and the primacy of the C over A dimension. The intention/ability account assumes that to survive in ancestral encounters with strangers, humans had to determine the intentions of other persons (the friend or foe decision) and their ability to enact those intentions (Fiske et al., 2007). The decision on whether a person is beneficial or harmful is more important than the assessment of how much benefit or harm the person may bring about. Therefore, the judgment of C qualities is faster and carries more weight in affective and behavioral reaction than the judgment of A qualities.

According to the double interest account (Wojciszke, 2005) the two dimensions emerge because A categories denote interests of the acting person, while C categories reflect interests of others who are recipients of the action in question. C is other-profitable because other people (i.e., action recipients, the perceiver included) directly benefit from such traits like kind, helpful, or honest and are harmed by their opposites (Peeters, 1992). In the same vein, A qualities are self-profitable because they are immediately rewarding for the acting person: whatever one does is better done efficiently. This reasoning was corroborated by a study on a large pool of personality traits (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) which showed that the more a trait pertains to A (e.g., efficient, intelligent, or skillful), the more it is perceived as serving interests of the trait possessor, not interests of others. The more a trait pertains to C (e.g., helpful, honest, or sincere), the more it is perceived as serving interests of others, but not interests of the trait possessor. When observing others, people are attuned to personal consequences of their behavior (is this person good or bad for me?), in that they assume the perspective of an action recipient resulting in a heightened use of C over A categories.

The double interest account was further qualified by differentiating not only between self-perspective and other perspective, but within the other perspective as well (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). "Others" are differentially related to the self, and the more another person is close to the self or interdependent with the self, the more his/her evaluation on the two dimensions will resemble the self-perception. Social interdependence emerges when individuals share common goals and each individual's outcomes are influenced by the actions of others (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003). It is frequent in close relationships, in work and sport teams, or when one person serves an instrumental function for another (e.g., client-lawyer or patient-doctor). In such contexts A qualities of the other person may become as vital for an individual's goal achievement as his/her own agency and the typical "C over A" pattern may get reversed. We found support by comparing the importance of A traits attributed to a close friend versus an unrelated peer. In the first case A traits were rated as more important than in the latter one. This suggests that in case of close others "double interest" means both benevolence (C traits) and efficiency (A traits).

## PRESENT RESEARCH

The intention/ability and the double interest models both explain the bidimensionality of social cognition and the primacy of C over A categories. However, the second model and its extension also interestingly predict when this primacy can be attenuated or even reversed. In social interactions people can and do assume two basic perspectives: they are either acting selves or more or less close observers (action recipients; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). As acting selves people are interested in effective goal pursuit which results in heightened importance of A. As close observers, for instance as a friend or a spouse, people are also interested in the actor's effective goals pursuit (increased importance of A categories), because this is—indirectly—beneficial for the observer, as well. As more distant observers people are less interested in the actor's effective goal pursuit, because it is not important for them. Conversely, both close and distant observers are interested in avoiding danger and striving for benevolent relationships with the actor which results in increased importance of C categories. Actors, besides being interested in efficient goal pursuit, should also be interested in benevolent relationships with others; this should result in high importance for C categories in the self-perspective, as well. In effect, the primacy of C over A may be predicted in the perception of more distant others. In the perception of closer others and in self-perception the difference should be attenuated or—in some instances—even be reversed.

We tested these predictions in two studies. In the first study we were interested in the construal of important events, that is, behavioral acts that would change the evaluation of a person. Therefore, participants recalled important events that had changed their self-evaluation or evaluation of another person who was either unrelated (a distant peer) or interdependent (a close friend). Participants described the behavior and the rationale of their evaluations, which were afterwards rated for the degree they referred to A and C. We hypothesized that behavior of an unrelated peer would be construed in C rather than A

(the usual C over A effect), but the opposite would be true in the construal of both own and close friend's behavior (a reversal of the usual C over A effect).

In Study 2, we analyzed how employees evaluate their supervisors in two different organizations. In one organization employees were strongly dependent on their supervisors' agentic skills (a business organization), in the other they were not dependent on their supervisors' agency (a bureaucratic organization). We expect evaluations of the supervisor should vary based on the type of organization and be differentially tied to his/her perceived A and C. In case of independence (bureaucratic organization) the evaluation should be more strongly tied to the supervisors' perceived communion (the C over A effect). In case of interdependence (business organization) the evaluation should be more strongly tied to the supervisors' perceived agency (A over C effect).

## STUDY 1

The participants recalled and described in detail an event which had influenced in a positive or a negative way their self-evaluation, their evaluation of a close friend, or their evaluation of a distant peer. Independent judges later rated these event descriptions for the extent to which they expressed A versus C content. We predicted the dominance of C over A in perceptions of a distant person but a reversal of this pattern in the perceptions of self and the close friend.

### Method

#### *Participants and Design*

The participants were 120 Polish college students (38 men and 82 women, 18 or 19 years old) split into small groups of three to five persons. The design was 3 (self vs. close friend vs. distant person)  $\times$  2 (event: increasing vs. decreasing evaluation) with repeated measures on the first factor.

#### *Procedure and Manipulation*

Participants described "an event after which you thought of yourself in a better (worse) way than before." Instructions specifically asked the participant "What was the event, what did you do?" and "Why did you think better (worse) of yourself afterwards?" After they had completed the event description, participants indicated the degree to which they experienced different emotions during the event. Participants also described an event from the perspective of two other persons, both an interdependent one ("close friend of the same gender") and an independent one ("person of the same gender whom you neither like nor dislike"), followed by the same questions as above. The order in which participants wrote about the three events was counterbalanced. Preliminary analyses revealed that order had no effect on any variables of interest.

#### *Dependent Measures*

Two hypothesis-blind judges rated the event descriptions for the A content and two others rated them for the C content. The instruction for the A rating was, "To what extent does this event show that the acting person is agency oriented, that is, that he/she is oriented toward doing things in an efficient way, or that he/she is not oriented toward action and its efficiency?" C relatedness was defined as "an orientation toward other people, focus on relationships, and contacts with others" (vs. lack of it). Judges used 11-point scales ranging from  $-5$  (*no agency* respectively *communion*) to 0 (*hard to say*) to 5 (*high agency* respectively *communion*) for their ratings. We averaged raters' responses because they showed a high level of agreement ( $r = .84$  for A and  $r = .81$  for C). The ratings of positive and negative events showed the same patterns. To facilitate data presentation and discussion, we converted the ratings into absolute values. Hence, the A and C scores

describe the extent to which the event was related to agency/communion regardless of event valence. Sample events rated as high in A and low in C are: "I passed a driver's license test at the first attempt, so I was very proud of myself," "My essay was scored as very poor. I felt pretty down." Sample events high in C but low in A are: "A friend of mine helped an old lady with groceries. I was impressed because many others do not care," "A fellow student refused to borrow me her notes from a class which I had missed and failed to fully grasp its topic."

#### Manipulation Check

In order to check whether the remembered events were comparable in terms of experienced emotions with respect to both event valence and to the perspective, participants rated the extent to which they had experienced a number of emotions during this event (gratitude, happiness, satisfaction, anger, apathy, depression, disappointment, guilt, shame) on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We used the mean ratings of positive ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and negative ( $\alpha = .86$ ) emotions for all further analyses.

### Results and Discussion

#### Manipulation Check

We performed a three (perspective: self vs. friend vs. unrelated person) by two (event: increasing vs. decreasing evaluation) by two (positive vs. negative emotions) ANOVA with repeated measures on the first and third factor. The interaction of event type and emotion valence had the strongest effect in this analysis,  $F(2, 236) = 396.71, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .77$ . Events increasing evaluations led to much stronger positive ( $M = 4.41$ ) than negative ( $M = 1.72$ ) emotions and events decreasing evaluations led to much stronger negative ( $M = 4.61$ ) than positive ( $M = 1.43$ ) emotions. This pattern was significant and strong for events involving each target: self ( $\eta^2 = .71$ ), friend ( $\eta^2 = .66$ ), and unrelated other ( $\eta^2 = .50$ ). There was also a significant interaction between event type, emotion valence, and target perspective,  $F(2, 236) = 7.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ , such that the emotional experience was not as strong (but with the same pattern) in case of the unrelated target perspective than in case of the two other perspectives. However, this effect was relatively weak. We conclude that the manipulation was successful and the differences in event content reported below cannot be attributed to differences in emotional experience between remembered events involving the self versus others.

#### Content of Events

We subjected the event content ratings to a three (target perspective) by two (event valence: increasing vs. decreasing evaluation) by two (content: A vs. C) ANOVA with repeated measures on the first and third factor. There was a highly significant interaction between the target and content,  $F(2, 236) = 275.25, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .65$  (see Figure 1). As predicted, events involving the evaluation of the self were rated higher on A than C,  $t(119) = 14.69, p < .001$ . Similarly, but less pronounced, events involving the evaluation of an interdependent other were also rated higher on agency ( $M = 3.53$ ) than on communion ( $M = 2.96$ ),  $t(119) = 4.23, p < .001$ . Events involving the evaluation of an unrelated other were rated higher on C than A,  $t(119) = 13.11, p < .001$ . There was no three-way interaction of perspective by content by event valence,  $F < 1$ ; the pattern illustrated in Figure 1 held for both negative and positive events.

Although C content was relatively low in the construal of events involving the self, our participants were highly sensitive of this content in perceptions regarding a close friend and a distant peer, as can be seen in Figure 1. C content did not differ for events involving the close friend ( $M = 2.96$ ) or the distant peer ( $M = 3.21$ ),  $t(119) = 1.52, p = .13, d = .18$ . This probably reflects the fact that C content is other-profitable irrespective of the closeness of the relationship to the other person. On the other hand, there was almost no A content in the construal of events related to a distant peer, and its amount was much lower ( $M = 1.31$ ) than in case of a close friend ( $M = 3.53$ ),  $t(119) = 18.97, p < .001, d = 2.23$ .

These results support our hypotheses. Important events that lead to changes in evaluations of an unrelated person are C rather than A in nature. This pattern, however, is reversed for events involving close friends or the self. These findings

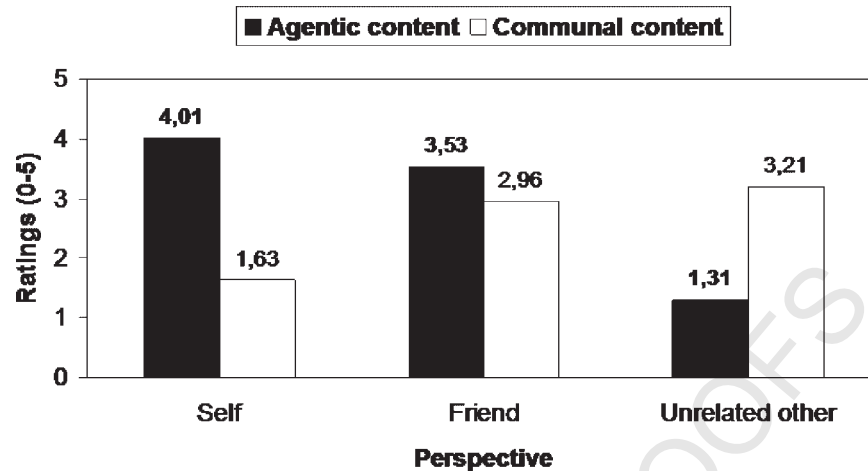


Figure 1. Content ratings of event descriptions reported for the self, a close friend, or an unrelated peer (Study 1)

extend previous research (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), because they refer to evaluations as well as construal of events. A and C are differently related to the perspective of self versus other and the importance of agentic content varies with who the other person is.

## STUDY 2

We analyzed employees' evaluations of their supervisors and how much these evaluations rely on the supervisors' perceived A and C traits. The evaluations were gathered in two organizations similar in terms of type of work (both were financial institutions) but different in the logic of their functioning. According to sociological analyses (Hausner & Marody, 1999) there are two large sectors of economy in contemporary Poland. One is the efficiency-oriented business, mostly privately owned, and functioning in accord with free-market rules and the principle of gain maximization. The other is the state-owned sector which functions in accord with bureaucratic rules and the principle of safety maximization (this refers not only to the typical public services, but many state-owned companies are run like that).

In efficiency-oriented organizations employees are dependent on their supervisors. The more agentic the supervisor, the higher the employees' potential outcomes—job security, salaries, promotions, fringe benefits (Hausner & Marody, 1999). Hence, employees should base their evaluations of their supervisors more on A than C. This should be different for bureaucratic organizations where employees' benefits depend not on their productivity but on various bureaucratic criteria such as the length of employment, formal qualifications, and a position in the hierarchy. An agentic, efficient, and demanding supervisor can even be seen as a troublemaker rather than a person increasing employees' outcomes. In this case, there is lower employee dependence on the supervisor and employees should base their evaluation more on the supervisor's communal than agentic traits.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 162 employees (65 men and 96 women; age range 20–66 years,  $M = 35.93$ ,  $SD = 11.08$ ) from two organizations—79 were employed in a financial corporation (efficiency-oriented organization) and 82 were employees of an administration institution (state-bureaucratic organization).

### Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire concerning various aspects of the organizational culture. Among others, the questionnaire included 12 evaluations of the supervisor which participants answered on five-point rating scales (e.g., “My boss shares his/her knowledge and experience with his/her subordinates”; “My boss praises my performance if I deserve it”; “My boss does not fulfill his/her duties,” five items were reversed). These items formed a highly reliable scale, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .90$ , and served as the dependent measure of global evaluation.

The measure of the supervisor’s perceived agency and communion consisted of six items each (agency: active, innovative, open-minded, resourceful, self-dependent, thinks prospectively;  $\alpha = .91$ ; communion: caring, considerate, empathic, honest, loyal, tolerant;  $\alpha = .92$ ), which participants answered on seven-point rating scales. According to normative data gathered by Abele and Wojciszke (2007, Study 1), the two sets of traits do not differ in global favorability ( $M_{\text{agentic}} = 3.77$  and  $M_{\text{communal}} = 3.83$ ),  $t(10) < 1$ . However, the first set is more agentic (3.85 vs. 0.53),  $t(10) = 10.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , and less communal than the second one (1.20 vs. 3.62),  $t(10) = 5.45$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Results and Discussion

### Initial Analyses

We reasoned that if the private business employees really depend on their supervisor’s agency, then their job satisfaction should be significantly related to it. If, however, there is no such dependency (as we assumed for bureaucratic organizations), then job satisfaction should depend on whether the boss is kind (communion) rather than agentic. We regressed job-satisfaction on the perceived agency and communion of the supervisor. In line with our assumptions, the perceived supervisor agency predicted employees’ job satisfaction in the business organization,  $\beta = .43$ ,  $p = .001$ , but not in the bureaucratic organization,  $\beta = -.04$ . Conversely, the supervisor’s perceived communion was a good predictor of job satisfaction in the bureaucratic organization,  $\beta = .35$ ,  $p = .013$ , but failed to predict job satisfaction in the business organization,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p = .32$ . Finally, in the business organization, the perceived A and C qualities of the supervisor predicted as much as 26% of variance in job satisfaction, while in the bureaucratic organization, the perceived A and C qualities of the supervisor predicted job satisfaction to a much lower degree (8%) and all explained variance was due to the ascribed communal traits. These results support our assumption that employees depend on their supervisor’s agency in the private business organization, but not in the state-bureaucratic system.

### Main Analyses

We tested our hypotheses by means of several linear regression analyzes, first for each organization separately and then jointly for both of them. In the bureaucratic organization, the ascription of communal traits ( $\beta = .61$ ) was a better predictor of the general evaluation of the supervisor than the ascription of agentic traits ( $\beta = .29$ ), and this difference was significant,  $t(80) = 2.17$ , SE of difference = 0.15,  $p = .016$  (one tailed). In the business organization, however, ascribed agency ( $\beta = .57$ ) predicted evaluation of the supervisor better than ascribed communion ( $\beta = .34$ ), and this difference was marginally significant,  $t(76) = 1.53$ , SE of difference = 0.15,  $p = .065$ . Finally, we performed a joint analysis for both organizations including two interaction terms: a product of the perceived supervisor communion and the organization type (the latter coded as a dummy variable) and a product of the perceived supervisor agency and the organization type. As the lowest panel of Table 1 shows, both interactions were significant. This finding supports that the determinants of supervisor evaluation differed between both organization types.

Ascribed C and A traits explained a large portion of variance in supervisor evaluations (66 and 67%) in both organization types. Both content dimensions were significant predictors in both organizations. However, in line with our hypotheses, the degree of employees’ dependence on their supervisors’ agentic skills mattered. Ascribed C was a better predictor of overall evaluation if dependence was low and ascribed A was a better predictor of overall evaluation if dependence was high.

Table 1. Regression analyses with employees' ratings of their supervisors' agentic and communal traits as predictors of overall evaluation in two organizations (Study 2)

	<i>B</i> ( <i>B</i> <sub>ll</sub> , <i>B</i> <sub>ul</sub> )	$\beta$	<i>F</i> (model)	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> adj.
Bureaucratic organization (df = 2, 78)			79.89***	.66
Communal	.32 (.24, .41)	.61***		
Agentic	.17 (.08, .27)	.29***		
Business organization (df = 2, 76)			77.78***	.67
Communal	.22 (.10, .32)	.34***		
Agentic	.35 (.25, .46)	.57***		
Both organizations (df = 4, 153)			79.71***	.67
Communal	.27 (.20, .33)	.47***		
Agentic	.27 (.20, .34)	.43***		
Communal $\times$ organization	.07 (.01, .12)	-.52*		
Agentic $\times$ organization	-.08 (-.13, -.01)	.49*		

Note: Each panel presents results of a separate regression analysis; *B* unstandardized coefficient with a 95% confidence interval (*B*<sub>ll</sub>, a lower limit; *B*<sub>ul</sub>, an upper limit);  $\beta$  standardized coefficient.; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

As discussed in the introduction, communion often dominates over agency. Communion is more easily accessible (Ybarra et al., 2001), and it is more important in evaluating individuals and groups (Leach et al., 2007; Wojciszke et al., 1998). However, the double interest account of social judgment (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) implies that this “default” option is attenuated or even reversed under certain conditions. The present studies lend support to this reasoning: first<sup>Q3</sup>, the “C over A” effect does not only show up in evaluating other people, but it also emerges in the construal of events related to other people. Events that led to a change in the evaluation of a distant peer were construed in communal rather than agentic categories (Study 1). Second, the “C over A” effect was evident in evaluating a real target, namely one’s supervisor in a bureaucratic organization (Study 2). Third, we showed that the attenuation and reversal of the “C dominates A” effect was evident both in the description of real targets (Study 2) and in the construal of events related to a close friend or to the self (Study 1).

The findings are a replication and valuable extension of our previous results (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, Study 4), where we found agency traits to be more important for a close friend than a distant peer. However, that study did not find a reversal of the “C over A” effect. Furthermore, in contrast to the present Study 2, we used hypothetical targets and relied on verbally declared importance of various traits in perception, a weak method since it presumes participants’ awareness of what influences their evaluations. Much evidence suggests that people are aware of effects of their own psychological processes (like attitudes), but they do not have direct access to the processes (like attitude formation). When asked about processes, people report lay theories of causation that are frequently wrong (Wilson, 2002). In the present studies the relative importance of A and C categories was gauged in an objective way as the weight the two carried in evaluative impressions. Study 2 seems to be especially valuable in this respect because the weight was operationalized as regression coefficients (widely recognized as good indices of the predictive strength) and the study was performed in a naturalistic setting.

The interdependence was gauged as close friendship in Study 1 and as a type of organization resulting in different employee–supervisor relations in Study 2. This opens some possibility of confound, as friends differ from unrelated peers not only in terms of interdependence. However, Abele and Wojciszke (2007) directly measured the perceived interdependence and found it was not only higher among friends, but it also completely mediated the friend–peer difference in agency importance. As refers to the organization type, our additional analyses on job satisfaction antecedents directly support the contention of different employee–supervisor relations in the two organizations. Furthermore, the possibility of confound is rendered improbable by the fact that the employees of both organizations did not differ in the perceptions of and global attitudes toward their supervisors. It is worthwhile to note that this is the first study of C over A using a non-student sample and gauging the level of interdependence by a social-structural characteristic (the type of organizational structure and resulting employee–supervisor relations). It adds to ecological validity of our findings.

Does the A over C reversal in event construal (Study 2) and in supervisor evaluation (efficiency-oriented organization, Study 2) mean that communal traits are more important than agentic ones in case of self-perception or in case of the perception of a close other? We do not think so. Communal qualities are important in every social interaction, and they are important in the perspective of the self, as well. It has been shown that peoples' self-assessments are higher in communion than in agency (Abele, 2003). Their spontaneous self-descriptions also show a general C over A effect (Uchrowski, 2008). However, this effect can be reversed if specific contexts are regarded (work vs. family, for instance). From our present understanding we assume that "C over A" is indeed the "default," but "A over C" is also possible, especially when the self, close others, and possibly also in-groups are judged with respect to activities of goal pursuit. Further research has to address the issue of an "A over C" reversal in a more fine-grained manner. The present data demonstrate that the reversal does show up, and our findings give some hints on the preconditions of the reversal.

Our theoretical reasoning was inspired by considerations of the self-profitability versus other-profitability of traits (Peeters, 1992, 2008) and their social desirability versus social utility (Beauvois & Dubois, 2000). It was also inspired by assumptions of the stereotype content model stating that the kind of relationship between perceiver and stereotyped group matters (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002). Our present findings extend this worthwhile research and bring to fruition the combination of basic dimensions of social judgment and basic perspectives in social interaction. The consideration of perspective (self vs. other) and kind of relationship (independent vs. interdependent) between the actor and observer/recipient allows a better understanding of the functional meaning of agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke et al., 1998).

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