Examining the Relationships Between the Socially Desirable and Undesirable Aspects of Agency and Communion

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Two theories addressing the relationship between the socially desirable and undesirable elements of agency and communion have been proposed. In their 1979 study, Spence, Helmreich, and Holahan suggest that agency is negatively related to an unmitigated, or undesirable, sense of communion, while communion is negatively correlated with a sense of unmitigated agency. On the other hand, Wiggins and Holzmuller, in their study of 1978, believe the desirable and undesirable aspects of agency are related to one another in a bipolar manner and that a similar relationship exists for the two domains of communion. While most appear to treat the differences between these two theories as a psychometric issue, the implications each has for understanding issues such as the socialization of gender-typed personality characteristics remain unaddressed. This paper provides a direct and comprehensive comparison of the two approaches. A sample of mostly Caucasian participants completed a variety of gender role measures and support emerged for aspects of both theories. Discussion centers on the meaning of the undesirable gender role concept.

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Since Constantinople (1973) first proposed that masculine and feminine gender role characteristics are multidimensional (as opposed to bipolar), emphasis has been placed on the socially desirable elements that make up the agentic (i.e., stereotypically masculine) and communal (i.e., stereotypically feminine) gender role domains. Restricting the conceptualization of gender roles only to those characteristics that are socially desirable has led to agency and communion being operationalized in a socially desirable manner. For example, consider the two most popular measures of either self-ascribed or stereotypic gender roles: the Bern Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). The BSRI was constructed using items that were desirable for either males or females to possess. The PAQ, on the other hand, was designed to include items that were equally desirable for both males and females, but were more stereotypically attributed to one sex or the other. As can be seen, even though the two questionnaires differ greatly in many aspects of their item selection procedures (McCreary, 1990), social desirability played a crucial role in determining whether an item was ultimately included.

The acceptance of such measures has meant that gender role research has been focused almost exclusively on the presence of desirable agentic and communal characteristics rather than on the presence or absence of undesirable agentic or communal attributes. Restricting our conceptual understanding and empirical research to only the most favorable aspects of gender roles confounds our interpretations of the data and, therefore, limits their generalizability. Thus, we know little about individuals who develop undesirable gender role characteristics, about how such characteristics are acquired during socialization, or about what the consequences of possessing undesirable attributes might be.

In order to understand these issues, it is first necessary to clarify the meaning of the undesirable aspects of agency and communion and the nature of the conceptual relationship between desirable and undesirable agency and communion. For example, do the positive and negative domains of agency and communion represent opposite ends of a bipolar continuum (such that those with many socially desirable gender role traits have few undesirable traits) or are they related in other ways? Furthermore, what relationship exists between the two socially undesirable domains themselves? Are they conceptually independent in the same manner as the positive dimensions of agency and communion (Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975)? The purpose of this study was to address such questions by comparing two competing theories about the socially desirable and undesirable elements of agency and communion.