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Unmitigated Agency and Communion
and the Implications for Dating
Relationships

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Distinguishing Mitigated and Unmitigated Agency and Communion and the Implications for

Dating Relationships

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Abstract

This study analyzed self-report and video recorded data from 19 dating couples in order to better understand the attributes agency (AG), communion (CM), unmitigated agency (UA), and unmitigated communion (UC), their interactions with the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB) interpersonal circumplex and the attributes' effects on dating relationships. The participants filled out self-report surveys on relationship satisfaction as well as measures that capture each participant's exhibited AG, CM, UA, and UC. Participants completed the same surveys six months later as well. Additionally, they were asked to discuss a conflict in their relationship for ten minutes, an interaction that was video recorded. Findings did not show significant gender differences on the attributes. Correlations between the four attributes and the measures of interpersonal interaction mostly did not reach significance and it was found that greater UA correlated with shorter relationship length and greater UC correlated with shorter relationship longevity. This paper suggests complexity in the four attributes that research has not previously captured that may be related to changing emphasis on gender roles or using observational instead of self-report data to capture interpersonal interactions.

Distinguishing Mitigated and Unmitigated Agency and Communion and the Implications for Dating Relationships

For many, interpersonal interactions can be puzzling, never mind the complexity of the interpersonal interactions that people experience around their romantic relationships. In order to understand interpersonal complexities, personality attributes can help inform the different ways in which people interact with and view the world. Two such attributes are communion (CM) and agency (AG). These attributes were originally proposed by David Bakan, who went as far as to describe them as the “two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms” (Bakan, 1966; pp. 14-5). For people high in CM, the ways they interact with the world are very other-focused. People high in CM are often highly agreeable, caring, and warm (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Bakan, 1966). The attribute CM is often considered to be stereotypically feminine (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Suh, Moskowitz, Fournier, & Zuroff, 2004). For those that are high in AG, their approach to the world is characterized by focusing on themselves. AG is associated with high levels of dominant behavior and low levels of submissive behavior as well as an emphasis on independence (Bakan, 1966; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Suh, Moskowitz, Fournier, & Zuroff, 2004). The attribute AG is considered stereotypically masculine (Suh, Moskowitz, Fournier, & Zuroff, 2004). While these attributes seem to be dualistic, most people actually embody fluctuating levels of both, which is a socially adaptive approach to interpersonal interactions.

When individuals are very low or entirely deficient in either AG or CM, they can be characterized by two new traits: unmitigated communion and unmitigated agency. Unmitigated communion (UC) is used when an individual is high in communion but almost entirely deficient in agency, thus their communal traits are not mediated or mitigated by their agentic traits (Ghaed

& Gallo, 2006). Unmitigated communion often predicts imbalanced relationships without reciprocity of care as well as submission and over-involvement in the lives of others (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006). Additionally, people who are high in the attribute UC are less likely to seek and accept support from others (Le, Impett, Lemay, Muise, & Tskhay, 2017). Conversely, unmitigated agency (UA) is found in individuals who are high in agentic traits but have almost no communal traits; therefore, they have agency that is not mediated or mitigated by communion (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006). Unlike AG, UA is not just related to dominance and assertiveness, but also may be related to control. Because there is a lack of balance in people with unmitigated attributes, these attributes are maladaptive and often have negative implications for interpersonal relationships and even physical health. Specifically, UC correlates with more distress and anxiety and less optimism and UA correlates with higher levels of depression and lower levels of well-being (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Le et al., 2017).

Background on Mitigated and Unmitigated Agency and Communion

Much psychological research has been done since Bakan originally introduced the two attributes to better understand the scientific validity and utility of AG and CM, which led to the addition of UA and UC. In order to help define these rather amorphous and broad constructs, Shiva G. Ghaed and Linda C. Gallo (2006) attempted to validate measures of AG, CM, UA, and UC by mapping all four of these constructs onto an interpersonal circumplex. This study required the 197 participants to fill out a series of self-report measures that measure their perceived levels of AG, CM, UA, and UC, as well as measures of how they interact interpersonally and measures of depression and anxiety. An interpersonal circumplex is a method of situating interpersonal constructs like warmth on a conceptual surface (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006). Using the original

interpersonal circumplex model, which uses the dimensions of hostility versus warmth and dominance versus submission, the researchers were able to project the four attributes on the circumplex (Wiggins, 1996). The results of this projection based on the self-report measures that participants had filled out demonstrated that AG was correlated with moderate dominance while UA was correlated with moderate dominance and moderately hostility. Additionally, they found that CM and UC fall into the warm and submissive quadrant, but it is interesting to note that communion was found to be slightly warmer than unmitigated communion on the interpersonal circumplex (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006).

Ghaed and Gallo's (2006) study provided excellent insight into a new way that AG and CM can be understood, through the interpersonal circumplex; however, there were some limitations to how these results can be evaluated. Using data from self-reports is a very efficient method of gathering data. However, when people are performing self-report evaluations, they fall prey to socially desirable responding. Socially desirable responding is the tendency to try to portray oneself in a way that will be acceptable to the researchers and can happen subconsciously. In this scenario, people might be inclined to report themselves as less hostile than they really are, for example, if they view hostility as a negative trait. Another limitation of this study is that people were simply reflecting on their own interpersonal interactions rather than engaging in interpersonal interactions. Reflection is more removed than actually performing a behavior and may not be as accurate in that it involves thought about an action and not the action itself. For these reasons, there is room for further research to engage in defining AG, CM, UC, and UA.

The Present Study

The present study sought to expand on Ghaed and Gallo's (2006) foundational study in three meaningful ways. First, the present research used an updated interpersonal circumplex that is capable of capturing more nuances in interactions. This circumplex comes from Lorna Smith Benjamin's Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB) model of the interpersonal circumplex (1996). The SASB circumplex has expanded upon the original circumplex by offering multiple surfaces as opposed to the singular surface the original circumplex offered. Surfaces capture the focus of the interaction. Within the SASB interpersonal circumplex, the first surface looks at interactions that are focused on the other person and the second surface looks at interactions that are focused on the self in relation to the other. On the first surface, the axes are warmth vs. hostility and autonomy-giving vs. controlling. On the second surface, the axes are warmth vs. hostility and assertion vs. submission. With the elaboration on the dominance vs. submission dimension to include how this differs on the two surfaces, there is more within each interpersonal interaction that can be captured. In this way, there is more potential insight, like understanding autonomy-giving as separate from submission, which can be gleaned using an interpersonal circumplex to define AG, CM, UA, and UC.

Second, the present study used observational data in the form of video recorded interpersonal interactions between both members of a dating couple as the foundation for evaluating interpersonal behavior. The video recordings capture a ten-minute conversation between a dating couple as they discuss a conflict in their relationship. This material comes from a study originally performed by Dr. David R. Moore and Dr. Jill Nealey-Moore on the physiological, relationship, and communication effects of UA and UC (among many other variables) and has been generously shared with the principle investigator of this present study.

This observational data will extend upon the self-report measures from Ghaed and Gallo's (2006) study because this video recording data will provide a more natural sense of how each individual behaves in an interpersonal interaction.

Finally, this study used data from young adult dating couples in order to extend Ghaed and Gallo's research by situating the data within a common interpersonal context. Often, relationship research focuses on married couples, so looking at dating couples can allow for more diversity in relationship research. As mentioned above, using dating couples as participants also allows the current study to evaluate how individuals connect interpersonally within an interaction rather than on a self-report measure. In these ways, using dating couples as participants helps expand upon the original study.

It is important to continue studying AG, CM, UA, and UC because these attributes guide the ways in which people approach the world and understanding the lens through which people see interpersonal interactions can help advance research knowledge, therapeutic practices, and the ways in which people can empathize with one another. Therefore, this study seeks to continue investigating these attributes in meaningful contexts, such as dating relationships. By using a combination of self-report and video recorded interpersonal interactions from dating couples, this study further investigated the differences and meaningful applications of AG, CM, UA, and UC. There were several hypotheses of the present study: (1) I expected that there would be gender differences in line with previous research findings such that men would score higher on measures of AG and UA, and women would score higher on measures of CM and UC. Additionally, in line with Ghaed and Gallo's results, I hypothesized that (2) AG would correlate with autonomy-taking and control on the interpersonal circumplex and CM would correlate with

warmth. I also hypothesized that (3) UA would correlate with autonomy-taking, control, and hostility and UC would correlate with warmth and submission.

In terms of how UA and UC affect relationship outcomes, I hypothesized that (4) partnerships in which at least one individual is high in UA would correlate with lower relationship satisfaction with their partner and shorter relationship longevity. (5) For partnerships in which one individual is high in UC, I hypothesized that this would correlate with lower relationship satisfaction and would have no effect on relationship longevity. This research predicted different outcomes on relationship length for UA and UC because I expected that the hostile tendencies of UA would drive the other partner to terminate the relationship, whereas in couples in which one partner is high in UC, I expected that the other partner would be unlikely to perceive the habits of the UC partner to put the other partner first as negative, and would therefore be less likely to terminate the relationship.

Method

Participants

This study used data collected from 19 heterosexual dating couples that attended a small, liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest. The couples were recruited and asked to fill out a series of self-report measures, listed below, as well as discuss a conflict in their relationship for ten minutes, which was video recorded. Six months later, the participants were asked to fill out several of the same self-report measures as a follow-up survey to determine whether the relationship persisted. These couples come from a larger study performed by Dr. Moore and Dr. Nealey-Moore that has survey data from 74 couples.

Questionnaire Data. This study used a variety of measures in order to capture each individual's levels of AG, CM, UA, and UC as well as their interpersonal interactions and a variety of outcome variables. The participants were asked to report on their sex, ethnicity, age, the length of their relationship, and to rate the seriousness of the relationship as the background and demographics portion of the survey. In order to measure how much AG, CM, and UA each individual exhibited, the self-report measure *Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Extended version; PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979)* was used. This scale is not able to measure UC, so the *Unmitigated Communion Scale* (Helgeson, 1993) was used to identify the individuals who are high in unmitigated communion. For measuring the outcome variable—relationship satisfaction—*Relationship Assessment Scale* (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), and *Index of Marital Satisfaction* (Revised version appropriate for dating couples; IMS; Hudson, 1997) were used. The demographic and background measures and the scales were given again at a six-month follow up.

Observational Data. The observational data for this study was the ten-minute video recorded conflict discussion task. In order to take the qualitative data of the video recorded conflict discussion into quantitative data, the current study implemented the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior coding system (SASB; Benjamin, 1966). This coding system uses the two surfaces mentioned previously in order to “code” segments of the transcribed conversation into codes that capture the content and process of that segment in terms of how it was significant to the interaction. The video is first transcribed, then segmented into meaningful segments—usually separating complete thoughts or significant shifts in tone or focus. Then, a coder or group of coders will code each segment by determining whether the focus is surface one, focused on other, or surface two, focused on self in relation to other. Then, the segment will be evaluated on

the warmth versus hostility axis, then by either the autonomy-giving and controlling or assertion versus submission axis depending on whether it is surface one or two, respectively. It is important to note that a segment can have a simple code, which would be just one code, or a complex code, where two or three codes are required to capture the interaction in the segment. The present research owes a large amount of gratitude to Dr. David R. Moore and a group of students who transcribed and coded the nineteen couples used for this study.

Results

Once the surveys were scored and the video recorded conflict task discussions were coded, the data were entered into master files in SPSS, an application for statistical analysis. Then, a series of analyses were conducted in order to test each hypothesis, starting with the hypothesis regarding gender differences. All statistical analyses used an alpha level of .05 (two-tailed).

Gender Differences

In order to determine whether men exhibited higher levels of AG and UA and women exhibited higher levels of CM and UC, I conducted paired-samples *t* tests. There were no significant differences between men and women on scores of AG, CM, UA, and UC measures (See Table 1). Using the survey data from all 74 couples from the larger study, however, when looking at the gender differences between men and women in the scores on the measures of AG, CM, UA, and UC, there was a trend towards significance for communal traits, with women scoring higher on average on measures of CM ($M = 28.96$; $SD = 2.57$) compared to men ($M = 28.10$; $SD = 2.96$), $t(146) = .47$; $p = .06$.

Agency, Communion, and Interpersonal Constructs

To explore the relationship between AG, CM, and the SASB-coded interpersonal interaction from the conflict task, I conducted a series of Pearson r correlations. The measures of the interpersonal interactions were the levels of warmth, hostility, control, autonomy-giving, submission, and autonomy-taking an individual exhibited in their interpersonal interactions. The research by Ghaed and Gallo (2006) suggested that agency would correlate with control and autonomy-taking (although this study was based on self-report of individuals, as opposed to observed interactions among couples). Based on the weighted sums of the interpersonal interaction measures, within this dataset agency was significantly correlated with less control ($r(37) = -.328, p = .04$). Communion correlated with self-reported warmth in interpersonal interactions in the Ghaed and Gallo study (2006). Of the interpersonal interaction measures, communion in this sample most significantly correlated with hostility, ($r(37) = .38, p = .02$).

Unmitigated Agency, Unmitigated Communion, and Interpersonal Constructs

When looking at the association between the personality attributes of unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion together with the observed interpersonal behaviors of warmth, hostility, control, autonomy-giving, submission, and autonomy-taking, I hypothesized that UA would correlate with control, autonomy-taking, and hostility while UC would correlate with warmth and submission. In order to identify the patterns within this sample, I conducted a battery of Pearson r correlations. Within the current dataset, UA correlated significantly and negatively with the net score of simple autonomy-taking codes ($r(37) = -.36, p = .03$). UC was negatively correlated with autonomy-giving ($r(37) = -.46, p < .01$) and warmth ($r(37) = -.37, p = .02$) and UC was positively correlated with hostility ($r(37) = .435, p = .02$).

Unmitigated Agency and Relationship Outcome Variables

In order to evaluate the effects of having a partner high in UA or UC on the other partner and the relationship as a whole, I conducted a series of hierarchical linear regressions. First, in order to determine the effects of UA on the partnership, a series of linear regressions with UA as the independent variable (as measured by the PAQ), and the partner's scores on both measures of relationship satisfaction (as measured by the RAS and IMS at time 1) as well as with the reported relationship length and longevity at the time of follow-up. Of these linear regression analyses, UA demonstrated the greatest effect on relationship length, ($F(1, 13) = 4.173, p = .062; \beta = -.49$) with an R^2 of .243. This indicates that 24.3% of the variance in relationship length can be explained by UA. The effect of UA on relationship length was in the direction expected with higher levels of UA resulting in a shorter relationship. For all other outcome variables, the effect of UA was not statistically significant.

Unmitigated Communion and Outcome Variables

To understand the effects of UC on the relationship outcome variables, another round of hierarchical linear regressions were conducted regarding the same outcome variables. These analyses found that UC has the greatest predictive power on relationship longevity, as measured by asking participants to report the length of their relationship at time of the follow-up survey, ($F(1, 14) = 2.90, p = .11; \beta = -.21$) with an R^2 of .171. The effect of UC on length of relationship was that partnerships with higher levels of UC had shorter relationships and, while these results were not statistically significant, UC accounted for 17.1% of the variance in relationship length and, given a larger sample size, it would be likely that this would reach significance.

Discussion

Previous research on AG, CM, UA, and UC has found a series of trends, such as predicted health outcomes and interpersonal circumplex relationships, among these four attributes, however, these attributes have not yet been analyzed using observed data from dating couples and the SASB interpersonal circumplex (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Le et al., 2017). Therefore, it is possible that some of the characteristics of the sample either deviate from or complicate the previously established norms. First, this study did not find results that reinforced expectations regarding gender differences (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). Men did not demonstrate higher levels of AG or UA than women and women did not demonstrate higher levels of CM or UC than men. The lack of significant differences between men and women may not be present, despite the fact that Bakan (1966) originally modeled AG after masculine stereotypes and CM after feminine stereotypes, because of the changing notions of gender roles. This progression towards disintegrating the strict boundaries of gender may be especially apparent at a liberal arts college in the Northwest. The reduced prominence of traditional gender roles among this sample could explain why there were not strong gender differences in this data.

In exploring how AG, CM, UA, and UC interact with the axes on the SASB interpersonal circumplex, previous research would suggest that that AG and UA would correlate with control and autonomy-taking, with UA being differentiated from AG by also correlating with hostility (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). For CM and UC, both have been found to correlate with warmth, with UC correlating with submission as well (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). The results of the Pearson r correlations for this dataset provided conflicting results with AG correlating negatively with control, UA correlating negatively with

autonomy-taking, and CM and UC correlating positively with hostility. There are several reasons why these results may lie in conflict with previous research. Primarily, the sample size for this study is relatively small; therefore individuals who are outliers may have a stronger effect on the data. Conversely, the small sample size may have meant there were not enough participants to see high levels of variation in terms of AG, CM, UA, and UC. Without variation, there may not be many members of the participant pool who can represent the extreme scores, therefore limiting the study's ability to truly capture associations between these personality attributes (particularly the unmitigated versions of agency and communion) and both interpersonal behaviors and relationship outcomes.

The second reason why the data may have differed from what previous research may have suggested is the lack of analysis on the complex codes. For the purposes of this study, the researchers treated all codes as simple codes and while this was expected to capture all of the aspects of interpersonal interaction that would be significant to this study, there may have been something lost in terms of complexity that may shift these results. In other words, it may be that individuals showing higher levels of UA and UC may be characterized by complex communication with their partners that the analyses in this study that were limited to simple communication were unable to detect.

Finally, it is interesting to consider what the implications are if these results truly capture how the SASB interpersonal circumplex and AG, CM, UA, and UC actually interact. The study by Ghaed and Gallo (2006) is the only available study that looked at these constructs using an interpersonal circumplex, so perhaps their findings are not reliable. However, this is unlikely. Ghaed and Gallo's (2006) study used self-report data, which is often criticized for being subject to socially-desirable responding. While understanding how socially-desirable responding can

potentially influence results is important to bear in mind, most validated measures are valid because socially-desirable responding has been found to have negligible influence on results. Another method to reduce the risk of socially desirable responding is to have the researchers be blind to the participant's results. So, because Ghaed and Gallo (2006) used valid measures and assuming they followed common practice of participant anonymity, it is unlikely social-desirable responding had a significant impact on their results. There is a benefit to the self-report data that Ghaed and Gallo (2006) used as well: participants are reporting on their usual behavior, so the self-report data gives a more universal view of the individual. While the observational data I used in the current study was much less subject to socially-desirable responding, the conflict discussion task only gave an indication of how the individuals interacted within a romantic dating relationship and under specific circumstances—discussing a conflict. Taking one sample of an individual's behavior is risky because it might be accurate for how the individual interacts, it also might be an anomaly. While the methods in the present study attempted to expand beyond Ghaed and Gallo's (2006) study, there are some considerations regarding global versus situational assessment of an individual that may result in Ghaed and Gallo's (2006) methods being a more trustworthy assessment of interpersonal interactions.

To elaborate on why the observational data from this study may provide a limited view of mitigated and unmitigated agentic and communal traits, it is important to note the nature of the observational data task: a conflict discussion. It is possible that the conflict discussion task does not prime AG, CM, UA, and UC as well as another task might and therefore might not have been effective in eliciting each participant's attributes. In research on attachment style, researchers found that affective priming related to a person one had a relationship with was more effective in helping elicit attachment style rather than a neutral prime (Mikulincer, Hirschberger, Nachmias,

& Gillath, 2001). If the four attributes are similar to attachment styles in this manner, then perhaps future research should try a task like competing to solve a problem, which may prime the achievement drive in people high in AG or UA, or a social support task, which may prime individuals high in CM or UC.

In terms of the relationship outcomes, the effects of UA and UC on many of the outcome variables did not reach statistical significance. However, as predicted, UA was predictive of significantly shorter relationships. The researchers anticipated this result based on the theory that someone would not want to be partnered with someone whose self-focused tendencies were not at all mitigated by the interpersonal warmth of communion and would therefore break up more quickly. While the researchers did not predict shorter relationship longevity for UC due to the idea that their partners would not be as inclined to end the relationship as the majority of the attention in the relationship would be focused on them and they would be receiving warmth and submission from their partner, it is possible that UC might produce shorter relationships. The partner high in UC may actually be the partner driven to terminate the relationship if their care is not being reciprocated. This is a potential explanation for the correlation with hostility in this study: it may stem from the resentment of feeling like one is giving to a relationship but is unable to ask for care in return.

Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

Overall, the results of this research imply complexity in understanding how AG, CM, UA, and UC interact with the interpersonal circumplex and in dating relationships. However, the potential deviations from what research has previously suggested must be interpreted cautiously. For one, this study had a small sample. While the larger study that this research has drawn data from contains 74 couples and may yield more robust results, from what data was coded and able

to be analyzed, there were only 19 couples included in this study. With smaller sample sizes, it is more difficult to see correlations that may be significant given more participants. Perhaps once the overarching study is able to evaluate all couples, there is potential to gain a more robust understanding of these four attributes in the context of dating relationships.

As noted earlier, another potential consideration is the lack of analysis of complex codes. It would be potentially meaningful to evaluate how complexity might influence the results of this study. For studies less constrained by time, further analyses regarding complex codes could help explain why some of the results seem to differ from previous research findings. Finally, the population in this study is limited in terms of age, race, socio-economic status, and location. In order for the results of a study similar to this one to be more generalizable, it would be valuable for researchers to recruit couples from a variety of backgrounds and ages.

Finally, because of the possibility that the conflict task is not the right task to prime mitigated and unmitigated agency and communion, it is important that future research try various tasks to determine whether or not observational data is a valid measure of these attributes. Using a task that would likely prime agency, like planning a trip or solving a puzzle, and a task that would likely prime communion, like asking the partners to provide support to one another, could have greater success in eliciting AG, CM, UA, and UC. If the right tasks are identified, then perhaps the benefits of observational data will outweigh the benefits of the self-report data.

Conclusions

The four attributes of AG, CM, UA, and UC moderate the ways in which people approach their interpersonal interactions and what they focus on in life in general. In better understanding these traits, research can help individuals, therapists, and further researchers to help individuals through interpersonal difficulties. From a more elaborate understanding of these

attributes, people can begin to work towards a better understanding of what makes relationships healthy. The results of several analyses in this study counter what previous research has suggested; however, this simply serves to demonstrate that there is more to learn about agency, communion, unmitigated agency, and unmitigated communion. A strong research foundation has been laid, however, with changing societal expectations regarding gender roles, romantic relationships, and the dynamics of interpersonal interactions, continuing to evaluate these attributes is integral to better understanding society.

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Table 1:

Summary of Paired Samples t Test Comparing Gender Differences on Agency, Communion, Unmitigated Agency, and Unmitigated Communion

Variable	<hr/>		<i>t</i>	eta ²	95% CI of the Difference
	<u>Female</u> <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<u>Male</u> <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)			
Agency	27.11 (3.96)	27.94 (2.55)	.86	.02	-1.22 to 2.91
Communion	29.26 (2.76)	28.89 (3.07)	-.43	.01	-2.18 to 1.44
Unmitigated Agency	25.63 (2.77)	26.05 (2.80)	.38	.00	-1.90 to 2.74
Unmitigated Communion	3.20 (.69)	3.26 (.60)	.30	.00	-.34 to .45

Note. Agency, Communion, and Unmitigated Agency were measured using the *Personality Attributes Questionnaire* and Unmitigated Communion was measured using the *Unmitigated Communion Scale*. Eta² was the measure of effect size. CI = confidence interval.