

# Social Psychology

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### **Special Issue**

The Big Two in Social Judgment  
and Behavior

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Andrea E. Abele  
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# Accentuating Your Masculine Side

## Agentic Traits Generally Dominate Self-Evaluation, Even in China

Chongzeng Bi<sup>1,2</sup>, Oscar Ybarra<sup>3</sup>, and Yufang Zhao<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Center for Psychology and Social Development, Southwest University, Chongqing, PR China

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Psychology, Southwest University, Chongqing, PR China

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

**Abstract.** Recent research investigating self-judgment has shown that people are more likely to base their evaluations of self on agency-related traits than communion-related traits. In the present research, we tested the hypothesis that agency-related traits dominate self-evaluation by expanding the purview of the fundamental dimensions to consider characteristics typically studied in the gender-role literature, but that nevertheless should be related to agency and communion. Further, we carried out these tests on two samples from China, a cultural context that, relative to many Western countries, emphasizes the interpersonal or communion dimension. Despite the differences in traits used and cultural samples studied, the findings generally supported the agency dominates self-esteem perspective, albeit with some additional findings in Study 2. The findings are discussed with regard to the influence of social norms and the types of inferences people are able to draw about themselves given such norms.

**Keywords:** Big Two, self-evaluation, gender roles, culture, agency, communion

Much recent research has begun to study the fundamental dimensions of judgment, reflected in research areas as varied as social psychology, personality psychology, developmental psychology, and organizational psychology. The fundamental dimensions of judgment refer to an approach that classifies many human traits and behaviors as abiding by two themes: an agency, status theme, and a communion, social and morality relevant theme. Agency traits are related to competencies, intelligence, and ambitiousness. Communion traits are related to characteristics that facilitate staying socially connected to others such as kindness and honesty (e.g., Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2008).

Agency and communion constitute two basic dimensions of social cognition and are considered fundamental dimensions in both person perception and group perception (e.g., Abele et al., 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Phalet & Poppe, 1997). Some studies found that cognition regarding others is dominated by communion considerations. For example, when we form impressions of others, communion has a primary and dominant role in our information gathering about others (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Further, semantic categories referring to communion are more accessible in memory than those referring to agency (Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). There is also a stronger tendency to interpret others' behavior in communal rather than agentic terms (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), and the emotion-

al responses to the behavior of other people are stronger when the behavior involves communion compared to agency (Wojciszke & Szymkow, 2003).

In contrast to the finding that communion plays a key role in the evaluation of others, recent research investigating self-judgment showed that people are more likely to base evaluations of the self and their self-esteem on agency-related traits – more so than on communion-related traits. Wojciszke and colleagues (Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011) found that self-ascribed agency is a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion, whether self-esteem is operationalized as a trait or as a state, as self-liking, self-competence, in terms of narcissistic tendencies, or demonstrated as preference for one's own initials.

At some level, such findings appear at odds with work on sociometer theory. Leary (1999) proposed that self-esteem evolved to help people monitor their social acceptance. The experience of low or high self-esteem serves as a signal to people of the extent to which they are succeeding in establishing social connections with others or are at risk for social devaluation and rejection (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007; Leary, 2003). From this perspective, then, interpersonal relationships and social acceptance – key aspects of the communion aspects of social life – have a much more profound influence on a person's overall opinion of themselves and their overall well-being. Although this research is based on differ-

ent research paradigms, sociometer theory does suggest a tight coupling between self-esteem and people's assessments of their social connectedness with others, which would imply a connection with how people assess their level of communion given the implications such traits have for social interaction and relationships.

Wojciszke et al. (2011) suggest that the discrepancy between their findings and sociometer theory is more apparent than real. First, the agency-over-communion effect in self-evaluation does not imply that self-ascribed communion traits do not relate to self-esteem, but rather assumes that self-esteem is driven more by agentic than by communal considerations. Second, general social rejection should not be equated with rejection that is based more specifically on communal deficiencies. And it is unclear in the context of sociometer theory what the more specific basis of rejection is.

Given that previous research on the fundamental dimensions has shown better prediction of self-esteem from agency than communion traits, in the present research we further test the hypothesis that agency dominates self-evaluation by expanding the purview of the fundamental dimensions to consider characteristics typically studied in the gender-role literature, but that nevertheless should be related to agency and communion. In addition, we used different conceptions of self-worth within the same study. We did this first by studying three types of self-worth (Huang & Yu, 2002): global self-worth, a more specific individual self-worth, and self-worth based on one's perceptions of how they are viewed by others (social self-worth), not the self. If the relationship between agency-related traits (our masculine traits) and self-worth is a matter of perspective (i.e., how I view myself versus how I think others view me), then it might be expected that the relationship between agency and global or personal self-worth will be stronger than that between agency and social self-worth.

Second, we focus on a different cultural context, China. Compared to Western countries, such as those from Western Europe and North America, East Asian countries such as China are considered very communion-oriented, in that they tend to emphasize the interpersonal realm and social harmony to a greater extent than Western cultures (Leung & Au, 2010). Hence, samples from China may provide a more conservative test of the agency dominates self-esteem hypothesis, a hypothesis that has been tested mainly in cultures that emphasize the importance of agency-related attributes (Wojciszke et al., 2011).

In addition, of the two samples studied in the present research, one was a Northern Chinese sample and the other a Southern Chinese sample. Different perceptions exist in China, as Northerners tend to judge Southerners differently and vice versa, the Northerners being associated with a strong, traditional male-dominated stereotype, while Southerners are regarded as placing greater value on the interpersonal and feminine dimension (Chen, 2003; Guo, 2000; Lin, 1936). Thus, by studying different samples from within China, the argument can be made that feminine or communion traits might play a bigger role in predicting

self-worth than masculine traits. Further, this might be expected to be more the case even when comparing Southern Chinese to Northern Chinese.

## Gender Roles, the Fundamental Dimensions, and Self-Evaluation

Abele and Wojciszke (2007) showed that stereotypic femininity is expressed in terms of communion traits, while masculinity is expressed through agency-related traits. This speaks to parallels between gender definitions and the fundamental dimensions, as suggested by some philosophers (Bakan, 1966). If communion and agency align with femininity and masculinity, respectively, then it could be expected that traits and attributes used in gender-identity research would provide an additional sphere in which to test the hypotheses regarding the type of traits and self-judgments that should underlie self-evaluation.

With this in mind, it is of interest that previous research found gender differences in self-esteem, with males reporting higher self-esteem than women (e.g., Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Research on gender identity obtained related findings, showing that the endorsement of masculine traits better predicts self-esteem than the endorsement of feminine traits (e.g., Antill & Cunningham, 1979; also see Puglisi & Jackson, 1980). As already discussed, research related to the fundamental dimensions showed that the endorsement of agency traits predicts self-esteem to a greater extent than the endorsement of communion traits (Wojciszke et al., 2011). Thus, one aim of this research was to relate work on gender roles to the fundamental dimensions by assessing whether traits used in gender-role research to assess masculinity and femininity indeed correspond to the fundamental dimensions of agency and communion – in addition to testing whether people's judgments of self-worth are dominated by the endorsement of masculine traits, even after controlling for sex.

## Study 1: Northern China

In this study, we tested the hypothesis that self-esteem is dominated by masculine (agency) traits in a Chinese sample, and that this relationship holds for different types of self-worth.

## Method

### Participants

A group of 213 students from the Tangshan Normal University in Northern China participated in this study. Of the sample, 73 were men, 140 women, and the mean age was 21.9 years,  $SD = 1.38$ . Participants were recruited through

university courses and given a gift or feedback in exchange for their participation.

## Measures and Procedure

The procedure involved having participants fill out the questionnaires in classrooms. The survey was conducted in Mandarin. After completing the survey, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

### Gender-Role Inventory

The gender-role inventory was developed by Liu et al. (2011). Both the masculine subscale ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and the feminine subscale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) consisted of 16 traits. Examples of masculine traits included *rational, brave, adventurous, dominative, and calm*; examples of feminine traits included *kind, compassionate, and frugal*. Responses were collected on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*definitely doesn't apply to me*) to 7 (*definitely applies to me*). High scores represent greater endorsement of the different traits (a pilot study confirming agency and communion ratings was also carried out).<sup>1</sup>

### Self-Worth Questionnaire

The self-worth questionnaire was developed by Huang and Yu (2002). It included three factors: *global self-worth* ("I am satisfied with myself," "I often feel I am useless" (R), 6 items,  $\alpha = .79$ ); *individual self-worth* ("I respect myself highly," 5 items,  $\alpha = .67$ ); *social self-worth* ("Many people like me," "In the eyes of others, I cannot succeed" (R), 5 items,  $\alpha = .54$ ). Responses were indicated on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*definitely doesn't apply to me*) to 5 (*definitely applies to me*). Composite scores were created for the subscales so that higher scores indicate more positive

self-worth judgments. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.

## Results and Discussion

We used multiple regression to assess the effects of the predictors – feminine and masculine trait endorsement – on self-worth, controlling for sex. The results (see Table 2) showed that sex had no significant effects on global self-worth ( $t(209) = -1.21, p > .05$ ) nor individual self-worth ( $t(209) = -.34, p > .05$ ), although it did have a significant effect on general social self-worth ( $t(209) = -3.12, p < .05$ ). Of greater interest is that the prediction of all three types of self-worth was dominated by masculine over feminine traits. The findings are thus consistent with an agency-dominates-self-esteem perspective.

Table 2. Regression results for Northern China (Study 1)

Self-worth	Predictor	$\beta$	$t$	Sig. of $t$	Adj. $R^2$	$F$ (model)	Sig. of $F$
Global	Sex	-.07	-1.21	.226	.30	3.41	.000
	Masculine	.54	8.69	.000			
	Feminine	.04	.63	.529			
Social	Sex	-.20	-3.12	.002	.24	23.29	.000
	Masculine	.48	7.51	.000			
	Feminine	.01	.18	.861			
Individual	Sex	-.02	-.34	.738	.33	35.39	.000
	Masculine	.58	9.51	.000			
	Feminine	.03	.42	.676			

Note. Female code 0, male code 1.

This study was intended to connect research on gender roles to the fundamental dimensions of judgment and also to test the hypothesis that masculine-related traits, as defined by previous work on gender roles, have strong agentic connotations but also serve as better predictors of self-worth than do feminine traits, which are more likely to have strong communion connotations. The findings, studying a sample of participants from Northern China and different conceptions of self-worth, were generally consistent with this hypothesis, thus confirming the usefulness of applying work on the fundamental dimension to these contexts.

## Study 2: Southern China

In Study 2, we wanted to replicate the findings from Study 1 in a different regional and subcultural sample, namely, in

Table 1. Means (SD) for Studies 1 and 2

	Study 1 (Tangshan)	Study 2 (Jimei)	$t$
Global self-worth	4.07 (0.61)	3.79 (0.67)	4.02**
Social self-worth	3.60 (0.55)	3.46 (0.57)	2.19*
Individual self-worth	3.84 (0.57)	3.62 (0.63)	3.45*
Masculine	4.67 (0.84)	4.71 (0.80)	-0.50
Feminine	4.91 (0.81)	4.68 (0.83)	2.57*

Notes. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , 2-tailed. The difference between masculine and feminine traits was significant in Study 1,  $t = -3.67, p < .01$ , while in Study 2, the difference was not significant,  $t = .50, p > .05$ .

<sup>1</sup> In a pilot test, the agency and communion nature of the gender-role inventory trait words (or phrase as is the case for the expression of some traits in Mandarin) were assessed by 40 undergraduate and postgraduate students (average age was 24.2 years,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The ratings were made on a scale ranging from 0 to 6, where 0 indicated *lack of agency or communion* and 6 indicated *very high agentic or communal content* of the trait. The agency ratings for the masculine words ( $M = 3.70, SD = 1.09$ ) were greater than those of the feminine words ( $M = 2.19, SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(39) = 9.98, p < .01$ . In contrast, the communion ratings of the masculine words ( $M = 3.13, SD = 1.11$ ) were less than those of the feminine words ( $M = 4.16, SD = 0.90$ ),  $t(16) = -9.81, p < .01$ .

participants from Southern China. As discussed earlier, compared to people from Northern China, those from the South are generally thought to place greater value on the communal and feminine aspects of social life (Chen, 2003; Guo, 2000; Lin, 1936). Studying this sample was thus expected to provide an even more conservative test of the dominating effect of agency (masculine) traits in predicting self-worth.

## Method

### Participants, Materials, and Procedure

Sixty-eight female and 71 male students from Jimei University in Southeast China were given a gift or feedback for taking part in the study. The average age was 20.5 years,  $SD = 0.96$ .

In Study 2 we used the same measures and procedure from Study 1. The  $\alpha$ 's for the masculine and feminine subscales from the Gender Role Inventory (Liu et al., 2011) were .88 and .86, respectively. The  $\alpha$  of global self-worth, individual self-worth, and social self-worth from the Self-Worth Questionnaire (Huang & Yu, 2002) were .82, .72 and .53, respectively (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations).

## Results and Discussion

As in Study 1 we used multiple regression to assess the effects of the predictor variables – feminine and masculine trait endorsement – on self-worth while controlling for sex. The results, largely consistent with Study 1, indicated that sex had no significant effect on the three types self-worth ( $t(137) = .83, .90, -.60, ps > .05$ ). Of greater interest, in this sample the results indicated that both masculine and feminine traits contributed to all three types self-worth (see Table 3).

The findings from Study 2 thus continue to show a role for masculine or agentic traits in predicting the different types of self-worth. However, in contrast to Study 1, there

was also evidence in this study that feminine or communion-related traits also mattered in predicting self-worth in this Southern Chinese sample. Although future research is needed to follow-up on this effect, it does suggest that context, in this case a cultural one that emphasizes the communal aspects of social life, can increase the degree to which communion-related traits help predict people's judgments of self-worth.

## General Discussion

In two separate studies we found that masculine and feminine traits at their core reflect the fundamental dimensions of agency and communion. The studies also speak to the robustness with which agency-related characteristics influence self-esteem given that in the present studies self-worth was operationalized at different levels of abstraction, including different perspectives, and tested in a cultural context that relative to Western countries places greater emphasis on the communal dimension. The present findings are thus generally consistent with Wojciszke et al. (2011) (especially our Study 1), but there appears to be some room for cultural influences (our Study 2). This, however, does not negate the fact that agency still mattered in predicting self-esteem even in the latter context.

Turning to culture, in the present studies we studied two Chinese samples with the intent of providing a conservative test of the agency dominates self-esteem hypothesis (Wojciszke et al., 2011). Chinese culture generally emphasizes the interpersonal realm and social harmony relative to many cultures such as those from Western Europe and North America. Advocating social harmony means avoiding conflict and also the expression of agentic traits such as competition and ambitiousness. The emphasis on communion is also evident in gender roles. In a series of studies, Wang and Cui (2005, 2007) found that expressing an androgynous gender identification in China was a risk factor for more social psychological adaptive problems, such as depression, anxiety, and behavior inhibition. In contrast, the more uniform endorsement of feminine or communion type traits was associated with better adjustment, which can be taken to be consistent with norms that generally value social harmony. Lin (1936) had earlier pointed out that "the Chinese mind is akin to the feminine mind in many respects. Femininity, in fact, is the only word that can summarize its various aspects" (p. 76).

Nevertheless, in both of the present studies, masculine or agency-related traits were central to self-evaluation, thus providing evidence for the importance of agency traits in these conservative tests of the hypothesis. What was common across both samples was the importance of masculine or agency-related traits in predicting self-worth.

Why should self-esteem be dominated by agentic over communal information about the self? One explanation is provided by Wojciszke et al.'s (2011) double perspective

Table 3. Regression results for Southern China (Study 2)

Self-worth	Predictor	$\beta$	$t$	Sig. of $t$	Adj. $R^2$	Sig. (model) of $F$
Global	Sex	.06	.83	.410	.32	22.96
	Masculine	.28	2.82	.006		
	Feminine	.35	3.49	.001		
Social	Sex	.07	.90	.369	.36	27.25
	Masculine	.34	3.44	.001		
	Feminine	.33	3.43	.001		
Individual	Sex	-.04	-.60	.552	.36	26.50
	Masculine	.39	4.01	.000		
	Feminine	.27	2.79	.006		

Note. Female code 0, male code 1.

model, which suggests that the duality of social cognitive content (agency vs. communion) reflects the duality of perspectives in social interaction (agent vs. recipient). They propose that thinking about others is typically dominated by communion categories, but that thinking about the self is dominated by agency over communion. Although we are in agreement with the general tendencies described by the double perspective model, there may nevertheless be room for other processes to give rise to self-evaluation with a focus on agency, or in our case, masculine-related traits. Below we outline some potentially relevant processes and rationale.

We argue that communion norms generally tend to be stable and positive and lie in the direction of social desirability (Monane, 1967; Ybarra, 2002). Thus, the general nature of such norms can often mask or make it difficult for a person's "true" communal character to come through, as the norm is to have high communal standing. Further, by definition, transgressions and violations of the norm stand out (Ybarra et al., 2008), which enables very little negative communion information to tarnish one's reputation in the eyes of others (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987; Ybarra, 2001, 2002; Ybarra & Stephan, 1996, 1999). Thus, social life appears to make it difficult for people to stand out on the communion dimension, although in a sense not standing out (following the communal norms) contributes greatly to social acceptance. Therefore, traits related to the communion dimension or feminine identity and roles may be *necessary* for social acceptance but not *sufficient* to dominate one's self-worth because it is difficult to distinguish oneself from others on this dimension.

In contrast, one's agentic traits or masculine identity or roles can facilitate social acceptance if certain competencies and abilities are necessitated by the circumstances. But agency-related characteristics are strongly related to power and dominance, which have been shown to predict feelings of self-worth (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008). Further, agency-related traits are psychometrically independent from social acceptance (Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001), and they tend to be intertwined with competition. Research on interaction goals has shown that others' agency-related characteristics are accorded greater attention under competitive than cooperative goals (Chan & Ybarra, 2002). Thus, social distinctions are likely to be drawn more clearly on the agency (masculine) dimension as people consider positive agency behaviors to be diagnostic and difficult to fake (see Tausch, Kenworthy, & Hewstone, 2007). So, unlike the communion or feminine dimension, what serves as the basis for distinguishing oneself are agency or masculine related traits and behaviors.

According to this analysis, then, what should drive people's judgments of self-worth is the degree to which they endorse agency-related traits or the masculine sides of their personality. Note that, on the surface, this hypothesis does not differ from that of Wojciszke and colleagues, although the underlying processes and implications do differ. Com-

munion or feminine traits matter of course, but beyond a certain point, if social acceptance has been accomplished, the focus should turn to maintaining and not on gaining even more social acceptance. Once socially accepted, self-worth should be driven then by where social distinctions and comparisons are possible – the agency dimension.

According to this line of reasoning then, it might be possible to create uncertainty in how socially accepted people feel to make salient the communion dimension, which might then increase the chances that communion information is used in self-evaluation (see Hastie & Park, 1986). This could possibly help explain the findings from our Southern Chinese sample in Study 2. This analysis also suggests that contexts in which there is greater emphasis on the communion dimension may tell us more about the prevailing goal (we should achieve social harmony) rather than about an established practice or norm. Future studies could try to categorize situations in which uncertainty for different norms exists, or manipulate norms in the lab, to test these and related ideas.

## Conclusion

The fundamental dimensions of agency and communion are prevalent in many areas of study, which suggests that they capture important and stable aspects of people's social cognition. In particular, we would argue that they also capture important aspects of how people characterize (Ybarra, Park, Stanik, & Lee, 2012) and evaluate the self (Wojciszke et al., 2011). The present research highlights their general influence, in that theorizing about the fundamental dimensions helps recast the characteristics used in gender identity and gender-role research and replicates research on self-evaluation in very different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the emergence of some differences in the findings points us to other processes that may be at play when people evaluate the self.

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Chongzeng Bi

Research Center for Psychology and Social Development  
Southwest University  
Chongqing 400715  
PR China  
E-mail chongzeng.bi@gmail.com or beech@swu.edu.cn