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Who is most likely to seek and give support in the face of agentic and communal threat? The roles of extraversion and agreeableness

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ABSTRACT

Agentic threat tends to elicit support seeking and hinder support provision. Communal threat tends to elicit support seeking and provision. We examined whether the associations between threats and support are moderated by Extraversion and Agreeableness. Three hundred fifty undergraduate students completed questionnaires twice daily across one week, reporting the worst stressor of the half-day, appraisals of agentic and communal threats, and efforts to seek and provide support. In response to agentic threat, those higher in Extraversion increased their support seeking and decreased their support provision to a greater extent than those lower in Extraversion. In response to communal threat, those higher in Agreeableness increased their support seeking and provision to a greater extent than those lower in Agreeableness.

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1. Introduction

Because social support has both short- and long-term benefits for wellbeing (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010), there is growing interest in understanding the antecedents of support (Collins & Feeney, 2000). One avenue for better understanding how social support arises is to view support seeking and provision as particular coping responses to stressful events. Individuals engage in a process of cognitively appraising stressful situations, assessing whether the situation has the potential to threaten something of value to them (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005; Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983). In turn, appraisals of threat impact coping responses to the stressor (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Schellenberg & Bailis, 2015). Additionally, personality plays a role in influencing how individuals cope (Lee-Baggley,

Preece, & DeLongis, 2005). The goal of the current study was to examine the roles of threat appraisal and personality in jointly influencing the extent to which support is sought and provided during stress.

1.1. Agentic and communal threat

The agentic-communal distinction may be a useful framework for understanding *dimensions* of threat appraisal. This framework puts an emphasis on the self-other distinction and has conceptual links to the Interpersonal Circumplex Model (Schwartz, 1992). The Interpersonal Circumplex Model includes several dimensions that can be differentiated into agentic and communal components (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). The agentic component involves dimensions such as power and achievement, whereas communion involves dimensions such as benevolence and universalism.

Distinguishing between agency and communion has allowed for a better understanding of multiple levels of human functioning, including basic human values, motives, goals, and behaviour (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Appraisals of threat in stressful situations may also be understood using this framework. Previously, we differentiated between agentic threat, which is the appraisal that one's own wellbeing is at stake in the situation, and communal

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threat, which is the appraisal that one's relationships or the well-being of others are at stake in the situation (Pow, Lee-Baggley, & DeLongis, 2016). We found higher use of coping efforts meant to maintain self-interest under conditions of agentic threat. On the other hand, we found higher use of coping efforts meant to maintain relationships and others' wellbeing under conditions of communal threat. Specifically, we found that agentic threat was associated with increases in support seeking and decreases in support provision. Communal threat was associated with increases in support seeking and provision.

In addition, our findings suggested that there are large individual differences in the extent to which people sought and provided support in response to agentic and communal threats (Pow et al., 2016). The goal of the current study was to examine whether differences in the extent to which individuals respond to agentic and communal threats with support behaviors are linked to Extraversion (E) and Agreeableness (A). These are personality dimensions that have not only been implicated in the social support process (Bowling, Beehr, & Swader, 2005), but also in theories of agency and communion (Fischer & Boer, 2015; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012).

1.2. The roles of E and A

The Big Five Model is a widely accepted model of personality structure (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005). The Big Five personality dimensions of E and A are the most strongly implicated in the agentic-communal framework (Fischer & Boer, 2015; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990). Individuals higher in E are described as more assertive, outgoing, and tend to seek more excitement compared to those lower in E. Those higher in A tend to be more amiable and socially accommodating compared to those lower in A. In a meta-analysis, E was positively related to agentic values including power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction; A was positively related to communal values including benevolence, universalism, tradition, and conformity (Fischer & Boer, 2015). Because of their agentic orientation, individuals higher in E are expected to respond to agentic threat with more effort to maintain self-interest compared to those lower in E. In contrast, because of their communal orientation, individuals higher in A are expected to respond with more effort to maintain relationships and the well-being of others when they perceive communion to be threatened compared to those lower in A.

1.3. The current study

We examined whether E and A interact with threat appraisals to predict support behaviors. Participants provided self-reports on E and A and then were followed twice daily over one week. At each time point they reported the worst stressor they experienced over the half-day, their appraisals of threat to agency and communion, and the extent to which they sought and provided support.

Those higher in E were expected to *increase* support seeking in the face of agentic threat to a greater extent than those lower in E (H1A). Additionally, those higher in E were expected to *decrease* support provision in the face of agentic threat to a greater extent than those lower in E (H1B).

Our second set of hypotheses was centered on the role of A in modulating support behaviors in the face of communal threat. Those higher in A were expected to *increase* support seeking in the face of communal threat to a greater extent than those lower in A (H2A). Those higher in A were also expected to *increase* support provision in the face of communal threat to a greater extent than those lower in A (H2B).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Procedure

Participants were recruited using the University of British Columbia's research subject pool to participate in an intensive longitudinal study (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013).³ Consistent with previous research examining individual differences in the stress process (Bolger & Schilling, 1991), we aimed to recruit 350 participants with at least 10 timepoints per person to detect a small effect.⁴ Initially, 412 undergraduate students agreed to participate in the study. However, 62 were excluded in these analyses because they did not provide at least one full diary entry ($n = 25$), they did not provide reports of personality ($n = 30$), or because they submitted more than two days' worth of entries at the same time ($n = 7$).⁵ Of the final sample of 350 participants, 70% were female, mean age was 20.54 years ($SD = 5.12$), and mean years in college were 2.14 ($SD = 1.11$). Participants identified as being of Asian heritage ($n = 177$; 51%), European heritage ($n = 113$; 32%), other heritage ($n = 36$; 10%), mixed heritage ($n = 13$; 4%), or did not report their heritage ($n = 11$; 3%). Participants provided informed consent, demographic, and personality reports in the laboratory, and then completed a web-based questionnaire at midday and evening for seven consecutive days. This study was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia. Participants received course credit for participation, which was voluntary and confidential.

Adherence was confirmed by a time and date stamp of all diary entries. Only time logs entered at midday and evening were included in the final analysis. Of the possible 4900 diary entries across participants included in the study, there were 3867 entries completed on time (1982 for morning entry; 1887 for evening entry), which is a 79% completion rate (81% for morning entry; 77% for evening entry).

2.2. Measures

Personality was assessed using the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999). The BFI assesses E, A, Neuroticism (N), Conscientiousness (C), and Openness to experience (O) using a total of 48 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "disagree strongly"; 5 = "agree strongly"). Cronbach's alphas in the present study were within the acceptable range: 0.84 for E, 0.80 for A, 0.88 for N, 0.73 for O, 0.83 for C.

The worst stressor of the half-day was assessed using an open ended question that read, "Please describe briefly the most bothersome event or problem you had since your last entry. It may have been about an exam or conflict with a friend. Whatever your most serious issue was since your last entry (no matter how minor or trivial it may seem to you), please describe it here." Seven items assessed agentic and communal threat, which were in reference to the question, "to what extent would you say each of the following was of concern to you in this situation?" These items were chosen based on previous research and to conceptually reflect the agentic-communal distinction (Folkman et al., 1986; For principle components analysis, see Pow et al., 2016). Participants responded using 5-point Likert scales (1 = "none/not at all"; 5 = "a lot"). Three items were used to measure agentic threat ("Losing your self-respect", "Things not running as smoothly as you would like",

³ Data used in this study were also examined in a previous manuscript (Pow et al., 2016). In that study, we examined the indirect effects of stressor type on coping responses through threats to communion and agency. However, that study did not examine the Big Five personality dimensions.

⁴ For further information about power, see our [supplemental file](#).

⁵ Participants included in analyses were higher on A than those excluded, $t(373) = 2.50, p < 0.05$.

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