



## Propensity to take the agent perspective moderates the relative importance of agency versus communion in self-esteem (but only slightly)<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

The current research focused on individual difference – propensity to take the agent perspective, in order to test if it moderates the well-established relationship between agency and self-esteem. We present three correlational studies examining if propensity to take the agent perspective is related to valuing agentic traits (Preliminary Study,  $N = 119$ , mean age = 22.18, 78% female) and if self-ascribed agentic traits are more related to self-esteem among those who highly identify with being agents in the social world compared to those with a lower level of this propensity (meta-analysis of Study 1 and 2,  $N = 290$ , mean age = 27.76, 79% female). The meta-analysis of the results supported the moderating effect of propensity to take the agent perspective on the relations between self-ascribed agentic traits and self-esteem. The present studies add an individual differences perspective to the discussion on culture as a moderator of agency based self-esteem. However, considering the small effect size, our research also indicates how universal (not only on cross-cultural but also on the individual level) the association between agency and self-esteem is.

### 1. Introduction

There is a growing discussion in the literature about the degree to which self-esteem depends on whether we consider ourselves to be agentic or communal. Numerous studies have shown that people largely construct their self-esteem based on their beliefs regarding their agency, and this pattern seems profoundly universal regardless of sex, culture or operationalization of self-esteem. At the same time, there is an interest in potential moderator variables that would show if and when agency could be less important for the self-image, for example, among societies that appreciate communal values, such as collectivistic cultures. In the current research we applied an individual, rather than an intergroup approach, and we investigated whether the individual differences in the propensity to take the agent perspective can interact with the importance of self-ascribed agentic traits in self-esteem.

#### 1.1. Agentic traits and self-esteem

Self-esteem is highly related to how people evaluate themselves on the agency dimension, that is, on traits responsible for an effectiveness in

goal attainment (such as competence or persistence), and to a lesser extent to how they evaluate themselves on the communion dimension, that is, on traits responsible for being a good member of social groups (such as kindness or honesty; for a review, see [Abele & Wojciszke, 2014](#)). In a series of studies, [Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, and Abele \(2011\)](#) showed, using various measures of self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, implicit measures of self-esteem, state self-esteem), that self-ascribed agentic traits were a significant and strong predictor of self-esteem among both men and women, among people of various ages. This was also the case among those who believe they value agency more than communion and use it as the base for their self-esteem as well as those who believe the opposite. At the same time self-ascribed communal traits either did not predict self-esteem, or were a weak predictor. Importantly, the same pattern was demonstrated in an experimental study in which the beliefs about one's agency and communion were manipulated, and self-esteem was the outcome variable ([Wojciszke & Sobiczewska, 2013](#)). Thus, the strong association between self-rated agency and self-esteem is evidenced not only by correlational data, but also by experimental data, which indicate that it is one's self-rated agency that affects one's self-esteem.

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Interestingly, people value communal traits even more than agentic ones in general (Suitner & Maass, 2008) and also rate themselves higher on communal than agentic traits (Abele, 2003; Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998; Wojciszke et al., 2011). Furthermore, one of the leading accounts on the function of self-esteem, *sociometer theory* (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), states that self-esteem is a result of being accepted or not accepted by others. Accordingly, self-esteem serves two functions: to track social acceptance, and to prompt affiliative behavior. This account clearly indicates the communal basis of self-esteem. However, a complementary recent account, the *hierometer theory* (Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & de Waal-Andrews, 2016), proposes that self-esteem is a result of a level of social status, and its functions are to track one's social status and to regulate assertive behavior. Mahadevan et al. (2016) found more consistent support for *hierometer* than *sociometer theory*. Overall, while the role of agency for self-esteem seems unquestionable, the role of communion for self-esteem is more complex and ambiguous.

### 1.2. Moderators of agency and self-esteem link

There has not yet been much research aimed at directly testing moderators of the agency-over-communion effect on self-esteem. Brown, Freis, Carroll, and Arkin (2016) showed that grandiose narcissism was positively related to agency and self-esteem, whereas vulnerable narcissism was negatively related to agency and self-esteem. Even though the authors did not test the moderation, but the mediation model (perceived agency mediated the link between narcissistic subtypes and self-esteem), the results indicated that the relationship between self-ascribed agency and self-esteem depends on narcissistic subtypes.

Relatedly, Wojciszke et al. (2011, Study 3) tested the personal importance of agentic and communal traits as a moderator of the relationship between self-ascribed agency and self-esteem. They found that the agency-over-communion effect was slightly stronger among participants who believed that agentic traits are more important than communal ones, compared to those who believed the opposite. However, even in the case of those who recognized the advantage of communal traits, their self-rated agency was significantly related to their self-esteem, whereas communion was not.

Gebauer, Wagner, Sedikides, and Neberich (2013) used data from an online dating site collected on users from 11 European countries and tested if agency is linked to self-esteem in agentic cultures (operationalized as societies high on agency), while communion is linked to self-esteem in communal cultures (societies high on communion), simultaneously controlling for age, sex, and religiosity. They found that agency was more strongly related to self-esteem among those for whom agency is self-central, which was defined as: coming from a high agentic culture, low religious, young and male, whereas in the communion self-centrality sample, i.e., older religious women from Germany, the pattern was reversed.

In a cross-cultural study by Wojciszke and Bialobrzeska (2014), self-ascribed agentic traits were a significant predictor of self-esteem in three individualistic samples (American, British, and Dutch) as well as in three collectivistic samples (Chinese, Japanese, and Colombian), among both men and women. Communal traits were a significant predictor of self-esteem only among women coming from collectivistic countries. However, contrary to Gebauer et al. (2013) findings, even in a collectivistic women sample, the agency-over-communion pattern was not reversed, but traits of both dimensions were equally strong predictors of self-esteem.

In the present research we were interested in individual rather than cultural or intergroup differences that could play a moderator role in the effect of agency on self-esteem. The rationale here is that just as some cultures or societies are more agency oriented than others, individuals also differ in how much they are agency oriented, namely to what extent they identify with being agents in their lives. Some people like to take a leader position when involved in group interactions and

prefer to make decisions, while some prefer to follow others' decisions and have less influence on what is happening. This individual difference is best described by a propensity to take the agent perspective (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). In the present research we tested it as a moderator of the relation between self-ascribed agentic traits and self-esteem. The present research is one of the rare attempts of testing the role of individual differences for the relations between self-rated agency and self-esteem. Moreover, we investigated a relatively new individual differences construct – the propensity to take the agent perspective.

### 1.3. Agent perspective

The Dual Perspective Model (DPM) proposed by Abele and Wojciszke (2014) states that there are two major perspectives people take in the social world – the perspective of the agent, that is, of one who takes an action, and the perspective of the recipient, that is, one to whom the action is directed and who experiences its outcomes. Although individuals take these two perspectives interchangeably in response to situational demands, they may also differ in the chronic tendency in this respect, so, for example, although we all have to manage tasks or make important decisions every now and then, for some of us it is more habitual and enjoyable than for others.

The propensity to take the agent perspective is defined as a habitual preference to take action, influence others and have control over the situation. According to DPM, people high in propensity to take the agent perspective, due to their focus on action and performance, would be especially interested in agentic aspects of the social world, e.g., how agentic they and other people are. Therefore, we assumed that for those with a high propensity to take the agent perspective, agentic traits such as efficacy or determination would hold a bigger value, and what follows, beliefs about one's agentic traits should influence one's self-esteem to a larger extent than in the case of those with a lower propensity to take the agent perspective.

Although the propensity to take the agent perspective is a relatively new concept, we consider it a very relevant individual difference potentially related to the relative importance of agentic traits for global evaluations. In essence, we would expect self-ascribed agentic traits to be more important for the self-esteem of those who strongly identify with being agents in their lives, and less important for the self-esteem of those who do not evince such tendencies.

It should also be clarified that the propensity to take the agent perspective and beliefs in one's own agentic traits are conceptually disparate. The propensity to take the agent perspective refers to a preference for certain behaviors and situations, basically to what position one takes in social situations (e.g., *I like to make decisions, I like to have an influence over what is happening*), whereas agentic traits refer to one's effectiveness with regard to such behaviors and situations (e.g., *efficient, competent*). Although it is very likely that the propensity to take the agent perspective and self-ascribed agentic traits are positively correlated and affect one another (e.g., natural born leaders feel more efficient, and also feeling efficient raises the propensity to be a leader), they are not the same and may manifest independently, for example, a person with high leadership inclination can feel inefficient (unsuccessful manager), and a person with little leadership inclination can see oneself as highly efficient (skillful subordinate).

### 1.4. Agent perspective and other related constructs

Propensity to take the agent perspective is a novel individual difference construct and at first glance it might appear similar to other constructs known in personality and social cognition psychology, such as locus of control (Rotter, 1966) or sense of personal control (e.g., Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Therefore, it would be worth pointing out the differences.

The propensity to take the agent perspective is a habitual preference to initiate actions, make autonomous decisions, and to not succumb to

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